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GREEN PASTURES AND PICCADILLY.

GREEN PASTURES AND PICCADILLY.

BY
WILLIAM BLACK,
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"A PRINCESS OF THULE," ETC.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
INTRODUCTORY	1

CHAPTER II.

THE MISTRESS OF WILLOWBY	19
------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER III.

THE MEMBER FOR BALLINASCROON	38
--	----

CHAPTER IV.

ALMA MATER	55
----------------------	----

CHAPTER V.

POLITICS AND NIGHTINGALES	72
-------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VI.

	PAGE
FURTHER POLITICS AND NIGHTINGALES	88

CHAPTER VII.

A CONFESSION OF FAITH	105
---------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER VIII.

MISLEADING LIGHTS	122
-----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER IX.

LOVE'S SORROWS	139
--------------------------	-----

CHAPTER X.

REPENTANCE	156
----------------------	-----

CHAPTER XI.

DE PROFUNDIS	172
------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XII.

HAVEN AT LAST	189
-------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIII.

FIVE-ACE JACK	205
-------------------------	-----

CONTENTS.

vii

CHAPTER XIV.

	PAGE
FIRST EXPERIENCES	225

CHAPTER XV.

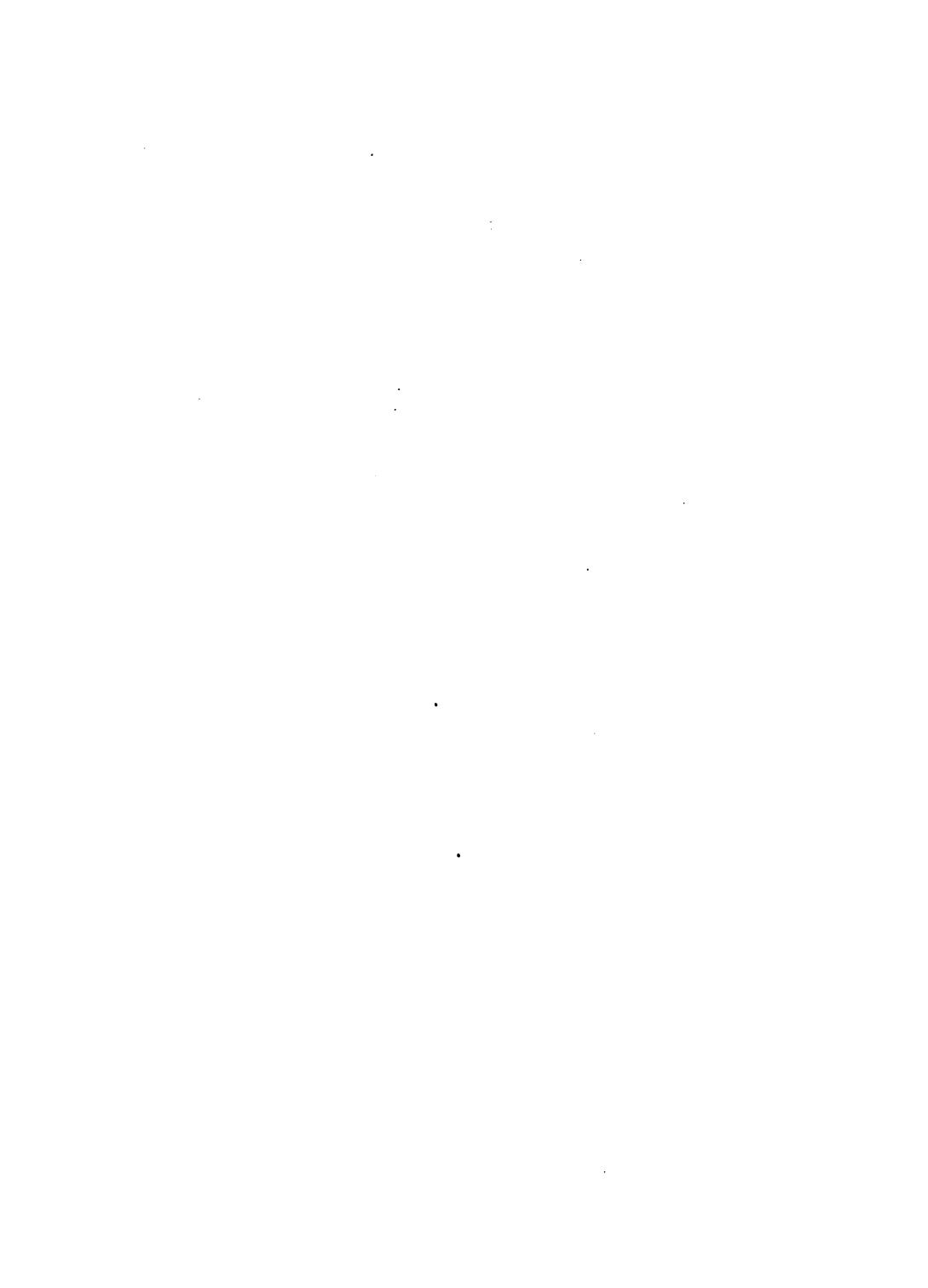
A NEW ACQUAINTANCE	241
-------------------------------------	------------

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CONSPIRATORS	257
-----------------------------------	------------

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HOME-COMING	274
----------------------------------	------------



GREEN PASTURES AND PICCADILLY.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

You may be sure there was a stir among our women-folk when they heard that a young man had come courting the Earl's daughter. We have amongst us—or over us, rather—a miniature major-domo of a woman, a mere wisp of a thing, who has nevertheless an awful majesty of demeanour, and the large and innocent eyes of a child, and a wit as nimble and elusive as a minnow; and no sooner is this matter mentioned than she says,

“O the poor child! And she has no mother.”

“That,” it is observed by a person who has learnt wisdom, and does not talk above his breath

2 GREEN PASTURES AND PICCADILLY.

in his own house, “that is a defect in her character which her future husband will no doubt condone.”

She takes no heed. The large and tender eyes are distant and troubled. She has become a seer, a prophetess of evil things in the days to come.

“Think of the child ! ” she says to our gentle visitor—who was once being courted herself, but is now a brisk young matron blushing with the honours of a couple of bairns—“think of her being all alone there, with scarcely a woman-friend in the world. She has no one to warn her—no one to guide her—”

“But why,” says our young matron, with mild wonder, “why should she want warning ? Is it such a terrible thing to get married ? ”

Common sense does not touch the inspired.

“The getting married ? No. It is the awakening after. How can she tell—how can she know—that this young man, if he really means to marry her, is at the present moment courting her deadliest rival ? Whom has she to fear in the future so much as her old idealised

self? He is building up a vision, a phantom, no more like that poor girl than I am like her; and then, when he finds out the real woman after marriage, his heart will go back to the old creation of his own fancy, and he will wonder how she could have changed so much, and grieve over his disappointment. Yes, you may laugh"—this is a sudden onslaught on another meek listener—"but every woman knows what I say is true. And is it our fault that men won't see us as we are until it is too late? We have to bear the blame, at all events. It is always the woman. Once upon a time—and it only happens once—she was a beautiful, angelic creature; she was filled with noble aspirations; wisdom shone in her face; I suppose the earth was scarcely good enough for her to walk on. Then she marries; and her husband discovers—slowly and surely—not his own blunder, but that his imaginary heroine has changed into an ordinary woman, who has an occasional headache like other people, and must spend a good deal of her life in thinking about shops and dinners. He tries to hide his dismay; he is very polite to

her ; but how can she fail to see that he is in love, not with herself at all, but with that old ideal of his own creation, and that he bitterly regrets in secret the destruction of his hopes ? That is no laughing matter. People talk about great tragedies. The fierce passions are splendid because there is noise and stamping about them. But if a man stabs a woman, and puts her out of the world, is she not at peace ? And if a man puts a bullet through his head, there is an end of his trouble. But I will tell you my belief, that all the battles and wars that ever were in the world have not caused the fifteenth part of the misery and tragic suffering that has been caused by this very thing you are laughing at—those false ideals formed before marriage. You may laugh if you like.”

Indeed, we were not disposed to laugh. She was really in earnest. She had spoken rapidly, with something of an indignant thrill in her voice, and a proud and pathetic look in her dark eyes. We had, after all, a certain fondness for this gentle orator ; and it was difficult to resist the eager pleading of her impas-

sioned words, when, as now, her heart was full of what she was saying.

Or was it the beautiful May morning, and the sunlight shining on the white hawthorn and the lilacs, and the sleepy shadow of the cedar on the lawn, and the clear singing of the larks far away in the blue, that led us to listen so placidly to the voice of the charmer? A newcomer broke the spell. A heavy-footed cob came trotting up to the verandah; his rider, a tall young man with a brown beard, leapt down on the gravel and called aloud in his stormy way,

“Donnerwetter! It is as warm to-day, it is as warm as July. Why do you all sit here? Come! Shall we make it a holiday? Shall we drive to Guildford?—Weybridge?—Chertsey?—Esher?”

The two women were sneaking off by themselves, perhaps because they wished to have a further talk about poor Lady Sylvia and her awful fate; perhaps because they were anxious, like all women, to leave holiday arrangements in other hands, in order to have the right of subsequently grumbling over them.

“Stay!” cries one of us, who has been released from the spell. “There is another word to be said on that subject. You are not going to ride rough-shod over us, and then sneak out at the back-door before we have recovered from the fright. This, then, is your contention—that a vast number of women are enduring misery because their husbands have become disillusionised, and cannot conceal the fact? And that is the fault of the husbands. They construct an ideal woman; marry a real one; and live miserable ever after, because they can’t have that imaginative toy of their brain. Now, don’t you think, if this were true—if this wretchedness were so widespread—it would cure itself? Have mankind gone on blundering for ages, because of the non-arrival of a certain awful and mysterious Surrey prophetess? Why haven’t women formed a universal association for the destruction of lovers’ dreams?”

“I tell you, you may laugh as you like,” is the calm reply, “but what I say is true; and every married woman will tell you it is true. Why don’t women cure it? If it comes to that,

women are as foolish as men. The girl makes her lover a hero; she wakes up after marriage to find him only a husband, and the highest hope of her life falls dead."

"Then we are all disappointed, and all miserable. That is your conclusion?"

"Not all," is the answer, and there is a slight change of tone audible here, a slight smile visible on her lips. "There are many whose imagination never went the length of constructing any ideal, except that of a moor covered with grouse. There are others who have educated themselves into a useful indifferentism or cynicism. Unfortunately it is the nobler natures that suffer most."

"Well, this is a tolerably lively prospect for every girl who thinks of getting married. Pray, Frau Philosophin, have you been constructing all these fiddlestick theories out of your own head, or have you been making a special study of Sylvia Blythe?"

"I know Lady Sylvia better than most people. She is a very earnest girl. She has ideals, convictions, aspirations—a whole stock-in-trade of

things that a good many girls seem to get on very well without. If that poor girl is disappointed in her marriage, it will kill her."

"Disappointed in her marriage!" calls out the young man who has been standing patiently with the bridle of his cob in his hand. "Why do you think that already? No, no. It is the girl herself—she lives in that solitary place, and imagines mere foolish things—it is she herself has put that into your mind. Disappointed! No, no. There is not any good reason—there is not any good sense in that. This young fellow Balfour, every one speaks well of him; he will have a great name some day; he is a busy, a very active man. I hear of him in many places."

"I wish he was dead!" says my Lady; and curiously enough, at this moment her eyes fill with tears, and she turns and walks proudly away, accompanied by her faithful friend.

The young man turns in amazement.

"What have I done? Am I not right? There is nothing bad that Balfour has done?"

"There is plenty bad in what he means to do, if it is true he is going to carry off Lady Sylvia Blythe. But when you, Herr Lieutenant, gave him that fine certificate of character, I suppose you know that people don't quite agree about Mr. Hugh Balfour? I suppose you don't know that a good many folks regard him as a bullying, overbearing, and portentously serious Scotchman, a little too eager to tread on one's corns, and not very particular as to the means he uses for his own advancement? Is it very creditable, for example, that he should be merely a warming-pan for young Glynne in that wretched little Irish borough? Is it decent that he should apparently take a pride in insulting the deputations that come to him? A member of Parliament is supposed to pay some respect to the people who elected him."

Here the brown-visaged young man burst into a roar of laughter.

"It is splendid—it is the best joke I have known. They insult him; why should he not turn round and say to them, 'Do you go to

the devil!' He is quite right. I admire him. Sacrament!—I would do that too."

So much for a morning gossip over the affairs of two people who were not much more than strangers to us. We had but little notion then that we were all to become more intimately related, our lives being for a space intertwined by the cunning hands of circumstance. The subject, however, did not at all depart from the mind of our sovereign lady and ruler. We could see that her eyes were troubled. When it was proposed to her that she should make a party to drive somewhere or other, she begged that it might be made up without her. We half suspected whither she meant to drive.

Some hour or two after that you might have seen a pair of ponies, not much bigger than mice, being slowly driven along a dusty lane that skirted a great park. The driver was a lady, and she was alone. She did not seem to pay much heed to the beautiful Spring foliage of the limes and elms, to the blossoms of the chestnuts, nor yet to the bluebells and primroses visible on the other side of the grey paling,

where the young rabbits were scurrying into the holes in the banks.

There was a smart pattering of hoofs behind her; and presently she was overtaken by a young gentleman of some fourteen years or so, who took off his tall hat with much ceremony, and politely bade her good morning.

"Good morning, Mr. John," said she, in return. "Do you know if Lady Sylvia is at home?"

"I should think she was," said the boy, as he got down from his horse, and led it by the side of the pony-chaise, that he might the better continue the conversation. "I should think she was. My uncle's gone to town. Look here; I've been over to the 'Fox and Hounds' for a bottle of champagne. Shan't we have some fun? You'll stay to lunch, of course."

In fact, there was a bottle wrapped round with brown paper under his arm.

"Oh, Mr. John, how could you do that? You know your cousin will be very angry."

"Not a bit," said he, confidently. "Old Syllabus is a rattling good sort of girl. She'll

declare I might have had champagne at the Hall—which isn't true, for my noble uncle is an uncommonly sharp sort of chap, and I believe he takes the key of the wine-cellar with him—and then she'll settle down to it. She's rather serious, you know; and would like to come the maternal over you; but she has got just as good a notion of fun as most girls. You needn't be afraid about *that*. Old Syllabus and I are first-rate friends; we get on capitally together. You see, I don't try to spoon her, as many a fellow would do in my place."

"That is very sensible of you—very considerate."

The innocence of those eyes of hers! If that brat of a school-boy, who was assuming the airs of a man, could have analysed the tender, ingenuous, lamb-like look which was directed towards him—if he could have seen through those perfectly sweet and approving eyes, and discovered the fiendish laughter and sarcasm behind—he would have learnt more of the nature of women than he was likely to learn in any half-dozen years of his idiotic existence.

But how was he to know? He chattered on more freely than ever. He had a firm conviction that he was impressing this simple country person with his knowledge of the world and of human nature. She had been but once to Oxford. He had never even seen the place; but then as he was going there some day, he was justified in speaking of the colleges as if they were all on their knees before him, imploring him to accept a fellowship. And then he came back to his cousin Sylvia.

“It’s an awful shame,” said he, “to shut up the poor girl in that place. She’ll never know anything of the world: she thinks there’s nothing more important than cowslips and daisies. I don’t suppose my uncle is overburdened with money—in fact, I believe he must be rather hard up—but I never heard of an Earl yet who couldn’t get a town-house somehow, if he wanted to. Why doesn’t he get another mortgage on this tumble-down old estate of his, and go and live comfortably in Bruton Street, and show poor old Syllabus something of what’s really going on in the

world? Why, she hasn't even been presented. She has got no more notion of a London season than a dairymaid. And yet I think if you took her into the Park she would hold her own there: what do you think?"

"I think you would not get many girls in the Park more beautiful than Lady Sylvia," is the innocent answer.

"And this old place! What's the good of it? The whole estate is going to wreck and ruin because my uncle won't have the rabbits killed down, and he won't spend any money on the farm-buildings. And that old bailiff, Moggs, is the biggest fool I ever saw: the whole place is overrun with couch-grass. I am glad my uncle gave him one for himself the other day. Moggs was grumbling about the rabbits. 'Moggs,' said my uncle, 'you let my rabbits alone, and I shall say nothing about your couch.' But it's an awful shame. And he'll never get her married if he keeps her buried down here."

"But is there any necessity that your cousin should marry?"

"I can tell you it is becoming more and

more difficult every year," said this experienced and thoughtful observer, "to get girls married. The men don't seem to see it somehow, unless the girl has a lot of money and good looks as well. Last year I believe it was something awful ; you could see at the end of the season how the mothers were beginning to pull long faces when they thought of having to start off for Baden-Baden with a whole lot of unsaleable articles on hand."

"Yes, that is a serious responsibility," is the grave answer. "But then, you know, there needs be no hurry about getting your cousin married. She is young. I think if you wait you will find at the right moment the beautiful prince come riding out of the wood to carry her off, just as happens in the story-books."

"Well, you know," said this chattering boy, with a smile, "people have begun to talk already. There is that big boor of a Scotch fellow—what's his name ? Balfour—has been down here a good many times lately ; and, of course, gossips jump at conclusions. But that is a little too ridiculous. I don't think you will catch old Syllabus, with

all her crotchets, marrying a man in the rum and sugar line. Or is it calico and opium?"

"But I thought he had never had anything to do with the firm? And I thought it was one of the most famous merchant houses in the world?"

"Well, I don't suppose he smears his hands with treacle and wears an apron—but—but it is too ridiculous. I have no doubt when my uncle has got all he wants out of him, he won't trouble Willowby again. Of course, I haven't mentioned the matter to old Syllabus. That would be no use. If it were true, she would not confess it: girls always tell lies about such things."

"There you have acted wisely; I would not mention such idle rumours to her, if I were you. Shall I take the bottle from you?"

"If you would," said he. "And I shall ride now; for we have little time to spare, and I want you to see old Syllabus's face when I produce the champagne at lunch."

So the lad got on his horse again, and the cavalcade moved forward at a brisk trot. It

was a beautiful country through which they were passing, densely wooded here and there, and here and there showing long stretches of heathy common with patches of black firs standing clear against the sky. And the bright May sunlight was shining through the young green foliage of the beeches and elms; the air was sweet with the scent of hawthorn and lilac; now and again they heard the deep “joung, joung” of a nightingale from out of a grove of young larches and spruce.

By-and-by they came to a plain little lodge, and passed through the gates, and drove along an avenue of tall elms and branching chestnuts. There was a glimmer of a grey house through the trees. Then they swept round by a spacious lawn, and drew up in front of the wide-open door; while Mr. John, leaping down from his horse, rang loudly at the bell. Yet there seemed to be nobody about this deserted house.

If was a long, low, rambling building of grey stone, with no architectural pretensions whatsoever. It had some pillars here and there, and a lion or two, to distinguish it from a county

jail or an asylum : otherwise there was nothing about it to catch the eye.

But the beauty of Lady Sylvia's home lay not in the plain grey building, but in the far-reaching park, now yellowed all over with buttercups, and studded here and there with noble elms. And on the northern side this high-lying park sloped suddenly down to a long lake, where there was a boat-house and a punt or two for pushing through the reeds and water-lilies along the shore ; while beyond that, again, was a great stretch of cultivated country, lying warm and silent in the summer light. The house was strangely still ; there was no sign of life about it. There was no animal of any kind in the park. There was no sound but the singing of birds in the trees, and the call of the cuckoo, soft, and muffled, and remote. The very winds seemed to die down as they neared the place ; there was scarcely a rustle in the trees. It was here, then, that the Lady Sylvia had grown up ; it was here that she now lived, and walked, and dreamed, in the secrecy and silence of the still woodland ways.

CHAPTER II.

THE MISTRESS OF WILLOWBY.

THE Lady Sylvia arose with the early dawn, and dressed, and stole noiselessly down the stairs, and through the great stone hall. Clad all in a pale blue, with a thin white garment thrown round her head and shoulders, she looked like a ghost as she passed through the sleeping house ; but she was no longer like a ghost when she went out on to the high terrace, and stood there in the blaze of a May morning. Rather she might have been taken for the very type of English girlhood in its sweetest springtime, and the world can show nothing more fair and noble and gracious than that. Perhaps, as her boy cousin had said, she was a trifle serious in expression, for she had lived much alone, and she had pondered, in her own way, over many

things. But surely there was no excess of gloom about the sweet young face—its delicate oval just catching the warm sunlight—or about the pretty, half-parted, and perhaps somewhat too sensitive lips; nor yet resting on the calm and thoughtful forehead that had as yet no wrinkle of age or care. However, it was always difficult to scan the separate features of this girl; you were drawn away from that by the irresistible fascination of her eyes, and there shone her life and soul. What were they—grey, blue, or black? No one could exactly tell, but they were large, and they had dark pupils, and they were under long eyelashes. Probably, seeing that her face was fair—and even paler than one might have expected—and her hair of a light, wavy, and beautiful brown—those eyes were blue or grey, but that was of little consequence. It was the story they told that was of interest. And here, indeed, there was a certain seriousness about her face, but it was the seriousness of sincerity. There was no coquetry in those tender and earnest eyes. Familiar words acquired a new import when Lady Sylvia spoke

them; for her eyes told you that she meant what she said, and more than that.

It was as yet the early morning, and the level sunshine spread a golden glory over the eastward-looking branches of the great elms, and threw long shadows on the greensward of the park. Far away the world lay all asleep, though the kindling light of the new day was shining on the green plains, and on the white hawthorns, and on this or that grey house remotely visible among the trees. What could be a fitter surrounding for this young English girl than this English-looking landscape? They were both of them in the freshness and beauty of their spring-time, that comes but once in a year and once in a life.

She passed along the terrace. Down below her the lake lay still; there was not a breath of wind to break the reflections of the trees on the glassy surface. But she was not quite alone in this silent and sleeping world. Her friends and companions, the birds, had been up before her; she could hear the twittering of the young starlings in their nests, as their parents came and

went carrying food ; and the loud and joyful “tirr-a-wee, tirr-a-wee, prooit, tweet !” of the thrushes, and the low currooing of the wood-pigeon, and the soft call of the cuckoo that seemed to come in whenever an interval of silence fitted. The swallows dipped and flashed, and circled over the bosom of the lake. There were blackbirds eagerly but cautiously at work, with their short spasmodic trippings, on the lawn. A robin, perched on the iron railing, eyed her curiously, and seemed more disposed to approach than to retreat.

For, indeed, she carried a small basket, with which the robin was doubtless familiar, and now she opened it, and began to scatter handfuls of crumbs on the gravel. A multitude of sparrows, hitherto invisible, seemed to spring into life. The robin descended from his perch. But she did not wait to see how her bounties were shared ; she had work further on.

Now the high-lying park and ground of Willowby Hall formed a dividing territory between two very different sorts of country. On the north, away beyond the lake, lay a broad plain

of cultivated ground, green, and soft, and fair, dotted with clusters of farm-buildings and scored by tall hedge-rows. On the south, on the other hand, there was a wilderness of sandy heath and dark-green common, now all ablaze with gorse and broom; black pine-woods high up at the horizon; and one long, yellow, and dusty road apparently leading nowhere, for there was no trace of town or village as far as the eye could see.

It was in this latter direction that Sylvia Blythe now turned her steps; and you will never know anything about her unless you know something of these her secret haunts and silent ways. These were her world. Beyond that distant line of firwood on the horizon her imagination seldom cared to stray. She had been up to London, of course; had stayed with her father at a hotel in Arlington Street; had been to the opera once or twice; and dined at some friends' houses. But of the great, actual, struggling and suffering world—of the ships carrying emigrants to unknown lands beyond the cruel seas, of the hordes driven down to death by disease and

crime in the squalid dens of great cities, of the eager battle, and flushed hopes, and bitter disappointments of life—what could she know? Most girls become acquainted at some time or other with a little picturesque misery. It excites feelings of pity and tenderness, and calls forth port wine and tracts. It comes to them with the recommendation of the curate. But even this small knowledge of a bit of the suffering in the world had been denied to Lady Sylvia; for her father, hearing that she contemplated some charitable visitation of the kind, had strictly forbidden it.

“Look here, Sylvia,” said he, “I won’t have you go trying to catch scarlet fever or something of that sort. We have no people of our own that want looking after in that way; if there are, let them come to Mrs. Thomas. As for sick children and infirm grandfathers elsewhere, you can do them no good; there are plenty who can—leave it to them. Now, don’t forget that. And if I catch either Mr. Shuttleworth or Dr. Grey, allowing you to go near any of these hovels, I can tell you they will hear of it.”

And so it came to be that her friends and dependants were the birds, and rabbits, and squirrels of the woods and the heath ; and of these she knew all the haunts and habits, and they were her companions in her lonely wanderings. Look, for example, at this morning walk of hers. She passed through some dense shrubberries—the blackbirds shooting away through the laurel-bushes—until she came to an open space at the edge of a wood where there was a spacious dell. Here the sunlight fell in broad patches on a tangled wilderness of wild flowers—great masses of blue hyacinths, and white starwort, and crimson campion, and purple ground ivy. She stayed a minute to gather a small bouquet which she placed in her dress ; but she did not pluck two snow-white and waxen hyacinths, for she had watched these strangers ever since she had noticed that the flowers promised to be white.

*Should he upbraid,
I'll own that he'll prevail*

she hummed carelessly to herself, as she went on again ; and now she was in a sloping glade,

among young larches and beeches, with withered brackens burning red in the scattered sunlight, with the new brackens coming up in solitary stalks of green, their summits not the fiddle-head of the ordinary fern, but resembling rather the incurved three claws of a large bird. She paused for a moment; far along the path in front of her, and quite unconscious of her presence, was a splendid cock pheasant, the bronzed plumage of his breast just catching a beam of the morning light. Then he stalked across the path—followed by his sober-coloured hen—and disappeared into the ferns. She went on again. A squirrel ran up a great beech-tree, and looked round at her from one of the branches. A jay fled screaming through the wood—just one brief glimpse of brilliant blue being visible. Then she came to a belt of oak paling, in which was a very dilapidated door; and by the door stood a basket, much larger than that she had carried from the Hall. She took up the basket, let herself out by the small gate, and then found herself in the open sunshine, before a wide waste of heath.

This was Willowby Heath, a vast stretch of sandy ground covered by dark heather mostly, but showing here and there brilliant masses of gorse and broom, and here and there a small larch-tree, not over four feet in height, but gleaming with a glimmer of green over the dark common. A couple of miles away, on a knoll, stood a windmill, its great arms motionless. Beyond that again, the heath darkened as it rose to the horizon, and ended in a black line of firs.

She hummed as she went this idle song; and sometimes she laughed, for the place seemed to be alive with very young rabbits, and those inexperienced babes showed an agony of fear as they fled almost from under her feet, and scurried through the dry heather to the sandy breaks. It was at one of the largest of these breaks—a sort of ragged pit some six feet deep and fifty feet long—that she finally paused, and put down her heavy load. Her approach had been the signal for the magical disappearance of about fifty or sixty rabbits, the large majority being the merest mites of things.

Now began a strange incantation scene. She sat down in the perfect stillness; there was not even a rustle of her dress. There was no wind stirring; the white clouds in the pale blue overhead hung motionless; the only sound audible was the calling of a peewit far away over the heath.

She waited patiently, in this deep silence. All round and underneath this broken bank, in a transparent shadow, were a number of dark holes of various sizes. These were the apertures for the gnomes to appear from the bowels of the earth. And as she waited, behold! one of those small caverns became tenanted. A tiny head suddenly appeared, and two black eyes regarded her, with a sort of blank, dumb curiosity, without fear. She did not move. The brown small creature came out further; he sat down, like a little ball, on the edge of the sandy slope; he was just far enough out for the sunlight to catch the tips of his long ears, which thereupon shone transparent, a pinky grey. Her eyes were caught by another sudden awakening of life. At the opposite side

of the dell a head appeared, and bobbed in again—that was an old and experienced rabbit; but immediately afterwards one, two, three small bodies came out to the edge and sat there, a mute, watchful family, staring and being stared at. Then here, there, everywhere, head after head became visible, a careful look round, a noiseless trot out to the edge of the hole, a motionless seat there, not an ear or a tail stirring. In the mysterious silence, every eye was fixed on hers; she scarcely dared breathe, or these phantasmal inhabitants of the lower world would suddenly vanish. But what was this strange creature, unlike his fellows in all but their stealthy watchfulness and silent ways? He was black as midnight; he was large, and fat, and sleek; he was the only one of the parents that dared to come out and make part of this mystic picture.

“Satan!” she called; and she sprang to her feet, and gave one loud clap of her hands.

There was nothing but the dry sandbank, staring with those empty holes. She laughed lightly to herself at that instantaneous scurry;

and, having opened the basket, she scattered its contents—chopped turnips—all round the place; and then set off homewards. She arrived at the Hall in time to have breakfast with her cousin, though that young gentleman was discontentedly grumbling over the early hours they kept in his uncle's house.

“Syllabus,” said he, “are you going to stand champagne for lunch?”

“Champagne?—you foolish boy,” said she; “what do you want champagne for?”

“To celebrate my departure,” said he. “You know you'll be awfully glad to get rid of me. I have worried your life out in these three days. Let's have some champagne at lunch, to show you don't bear malice. Won't you, old Syllabus?”

“Champagne?” said she. “Wine is not good for school-boys. Is it sixpence you want to buy toffy with on the way to the station?”

After breakfast she had her rounds of the garden and green-houses to make; she visited the kennels, and saw that the dogs had plenty of water; she went down to the lake to see

that the swans had their food ; she had a dumb conversation with her pony that was grazing in the meadow. How could the sweet days pass more pleasantly ? The air was fresh and mild ; the skies blue ; the sun warm on the buttercups of the park—in fact, when she returned to the Hall she found that her small bronze shoes and the foot of her dress were all dusted over with a gold powder.

But this was not to be an ordinary day. First of all she was greatly troubled by the mysterious disappearance of Johnny Blythe, who, she was afraid, would miss his train in the afternoon ; then she was delighted by his appearance in company with a visitor, who was easily persuaded to stay to lunch ; then there was a pretty quarrel over the production of that bottle of public-house champagne — at which the girl turned, with a little flush in her cheek, to her visitor, whom she begged to forgive this piece of school-boyish folly. Then Mr. John was bundled off in the waggonette to the station, and she and her visitor were left alone.

What had Madame Mephistopheles to do with this innocent girl?

"Oh, Lady Sylvia," she said, "how delightfully quiet you are here. Each time I come the stillness of the Hall and the park strikes me more and more. It is a place to dream one's life away in, among the trees on the fine days, in the library or the bad ones. I suppose you don't wish ever to leave Willowby?"

"N—no," said the girl, with a faint touch of colour in her face; and then she added, "But don't you think that one ought to try to understand what is going on outside one's immediate circle? One must become so ignorant, you know. I have been reading the leading articles in the *Times* lately."

"Oh, indeed!"

"Yes; but they only show me how very ignorant I must be, for I can scarcely find one that I can understand. And I have been greatly disappointed, too, with another thing. Have you seen this book?"

She went and fetched, from an adjoining

table, a volume which she placed in her visitor's hands. It was entitled 'The Ideas of the Day on Policy.'

"There was a friend of papa's here one evening," said Lady Sylvia, demurely, "and we were talking about the greatly different opinions in politics that people held, and I asked him how an ignorant person like myself was to decide which to believe. Then he said, 'Oh, if you want to see all the *pros* and *cons* of the great political questions ranged opposite each other, take some such book as Buxton's 'Ideas of the Day,' then you can compare them; and take which one strikes you as being most reasonable.' Well, I sent for the book; but look at it! It is all general principles. It does not tell me anything. I am sure no one could have read more carefully than I did the articles in the *Times* on the Irish Universities Bill. I have followed everything that has been said, and I am quite convinced by the argument; but I can't make out what the real thing is behind. And then I go to the book that was recommended to me. Look at it, my dear

Mrs. ——. All you can get is a series of propositions about national education. How does that help you to understand the Irish Universities?"

Her visitor laughed, and put down the book ; then she placed her hand within the girl's arm, and they went out for a stroll in the park, through the long warm grass, and golden butter-cups, and blue speedwells.

" Why should you take such a new interest in politics, Lady Sylvia ?" said Madam Mephistopheles, lightly.

" I want to take an interest in what concerns so many of my fellow-creatures," said the girl, simply. " Is not that natural ? And if I were a man," she added, with some heightened colour, " I should care for nothing but politics ! Think of the good one might do—think of the power one might have. That would be worth living for—that would be worth giving one's life for—to be able to cure some of the misery of the world, and make wise laws, and make one's country respected among other nations. Do you know, I cannot understand how men can

pass their lives in painting pretty pictures, and writing pretty verses, when there is all that real work to be done—millions of their fellow-creatures growing up in ignorance and misery—the poor becoming poorer every day, until no one knows where the wretchedness is to cease."

These were fine notions to have got into the head of an ingenuous country maiden; and perhaps that reflection occurred to herself too, for she suddenly stopped, and her face was red. But her kind friend took no notice of this retiring modesty. On the contrary, she warmly approved of her companion's ways of thinking. England was proud of her statesmen. The gratitude of millions was the reward of him who devised wise statutes. What nobler vocation in life could there be for a man than philanthropy exalted to the rank of a science? But at the same time . . .

Ah! yes, at the same time a young girl must not fancy that all politicians were patriots. Sometimes it was the meaner ambitions connected with self that were the occasion of great

public service. We ought not to be disappointed on discovering that our hero had some earthly alloy in his composition.

Indeed, continued this Mephistopheles, there was always a danger of allowing our imaginative conceptions of people to run too far. Young persons, more especially, who had but little practical experience of life, were often disappointed because they expected too much. Human nature was only human nature. Lady Sylvia now, for example, had doubtless never thought about marriage; but did she not know how many persons were grievously disappointed merely because they had been too generously imaginative before marriage?

“But how can any one marry without absolute admiration and absolute confidence?” demanded the girl, with some pride, but with her eyes cast down.

And there was no one there to interpose, and cry—“Oh, woman, woman, come away, and let the child dream her dream. If it is all a mistake—if it has to be repented for in hot tears and with an aching heart—if it lasts for but a

year, a month, a day—leave her with this beautiful faith in love, and life, and heroism, which may soon enough be taken away from her."

CHAPTER III.

THE MEMBER FOR BALLINASCROON.

IN the first-floor room of a small house in Piccadilly a young man of six-and-twenty or so was busily writing letters. By rights the room should have been a drawing-room—and a woman might have made of it a very pretty drawing-room indeed; but there were no flowers or trailing creepers in the small balcony; there were no lace curtains to prevent the sunlight streaming through the open French windows full on the worn and faded carpet; while this half study, half parlour, had scattered about in it all the signs of a bachelor's existence in the shape of wooden pipes, time-tables, slippers, and the like. When the letters were finished the writer struck a bell before him on the table. His servant appeared.

" You will post those letters, Jackson," said he, " and have a hansom ready for me at 3.15."

" Yes, sir," said the man ; and then he hesitated. " Beg your pardon, sir, but the gentlemen below are rather impatient, sir—they are a little excited, sir."

" Very well," said the young man, carelessly. " Take my bag down. Stay, here are some papers you had better put in."

He rose and went to get the papers—one or two thin blue books and some drafted bills—and now one may get a better look at the Member for Ballinascroon. He was not over five feet eight; but he was a bony, firm-framed young man, who had much more character than prettiness in his face. The closely-cropped beard and whiskers did not at all conceal the lines of strength about his cheek and chin; and the shaggy, dark brown eyebrows gave shadow and intensity to the shrewd and piercing grey eyes. It was a face that gave evidence of keen resolve, of ready action, of persistence. And although young Balfour had the patient and steady deter-

mination of the Scotch—or, let us say, of the Teuton—as part of his birth-right, and although even that had been overlaid by the reticence of manner and the gentleness—the almost hesitating gentleness—of speech of an Oxford don, any one could see that there was something Celtic-looking about the grey eyes and the heavy eyebrows, and every one who knew Balfour knew that sometimes a flash of vehement enthusiasm, or anger, or scorn, would break through that suavity of manner which some considered to be just a trifle too supercilious.

On this occasion, Hugh Balfour, having made all the preparations for his departure which he considered to be necessary, went down-stairs to the large room on the ground floor. There was a noise of voices in that apartment. As he entered, these angry sounds ceased; he bowed slightly, went up to the head of the room, and said—"Gentlemen, will you be seated?"

"Sorr," said a small man, with a large chest, a white waistcoat, and a face pink with anger or whisky, or both, "Sorr, 'tis twenty-three

minutes by my watch ye have kept us waiting——”

“I know,” said the young man calmly; “I am very sorry. Will you be good enough to proceed to business, gentlemen?”

Thus admonished, the spokesman of the eight or ten persons in the room addressed himself to the speech which he had obviously prepared. But how could he, in the idyllic seclusion of the back-parlour of a Ballinascroon public-house, have anticipated and prepared for the interruptions falling from a young man who, whether at the Oxford Union or at St. Stephen’s, had acquired a pretty fair reputation for saying about the most irritating and contemptuous things that could vex the soul of an opponent?

“Sorr,” said the orator, swelling out his white waistcoat, “the gentlemen” (he said gentlemen, but never mind) “the gentlemen who are with me this day are a deputation, a deputation, sorr, of the electors of the borough of Ballinascroon, which you have the honour to represent in Parliament. We held a meeting, sorr, as you know. You were invited to attend that meet-

ing. You refused to attend that meeting—although it was called to consider your conduct as the representative of the borough of Ballinascroon."

Mr. Balfour nodded: this young man did not seem to be much impressed by the desperate nature of the situation.

"And now, sorr," continued the orator, grouping his companions together with a wave of his hand, "we have come as a deputation to lay before you certain facts which your constituents, sorr, hope will induce you to take that course—the only course, I may say—that an honourable man could follow."

"Very well."

"Sorr, you are aware that you succeeded the Honourable Oliver Glynne in the representation of the borough of Ballinascroon. You are aware, sorr, that when Mr. Glynne contested the borough, he spent no less than £10,800 in the election——"

"I am quite aware of these facts," interrupted Balfour, speaking slowly and clearly. "I am quite aware that Mr. Glynne kept the whole

constituency drunk for three months. I am quite aware that he spent all that money ; for I don't believe there was a man of you came out of the election with clean hands. Well ?”

The orator was rather disconcerted, and gasped a little ; but a murmur of indignant repudiation from his companions nerved him to a further effort.

“Sorr, it ill becomes you to bring such charges against the borough that has placed you in Parliament, and against the man who gave you his seat. Mr. Glynne was a gentleman, sorr ; he spent his money like a gentleman ; and when he was unseated ” (he said onsated, but no matter) “it was from no regard for you, sorr, but from our regard for him that we returned you to Parliament, and have allowed you to sit there, sorr, until such times as a general election will enable us to send the man of our true choice to represent us at St. Stephen's.”

There was a loud murmur of approval.

“I beg your pardon,” said Balfour. “I must correct you on one point. You don't allow me to sit in Parliament. I sit there of my own

choice. You would turn me out if you could to-morrow ; but you see you can't."

" I consider, sorr, that in that shameless avowal——"

Here there was a flash of light in those grey eyes ; but the indiscreet orator did not observe it.

" ——You have justified the action we have taken in calling on a public meeting to denounce your conduct as the representative of Ballinascroon. Sorr, you are not the representative of Ballinascroon. I will make bold to say that you are sitting in the honourable House of Commons under false pretences. You neglect our interests. You treat our communications, our remonstrances, with an insulting indifference. The cry of our fellow-countrymen in prison—political prisoners in a free country, sorr—is nothing to you. You allow our fisheries to dwindle and disappear for want of that help which you give freely enough to your own country, sorr. And on the great question that is making the pulse of Ireland beat as it has never beaten before, that is making her sons and her

daughters curse the slavery that binds them in chains of iron, sorr, you have treated us with ridicule and scorn. When Mr. O'Byrne called upon you at the Reform Club, sorr, you walked past him and told the menial in livery to inform him that you were not in the Club. Is that the conduct of a member of the honourable House of Commons, sorr? Is it the conduct of a gentleman?"

Here arose another murmur of approval. Balfour looked at his watch.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I am sorry I must leave you at 3.15; my train goes at 3.30 from Paddington. Do I understand you that that is all you have to say?"

Here there were loud cries of "No! no!
Resign! resign!"

"——because I don't think it was worth your while to come all the way to London to say it. I read it every week in the columns of that delightful print, the *Ballinascroon Sentinel*. However, you have been very outspoken; and I shall be equally frank. You can't have all the frankness your side, you know. Let me

say, then, that I don't care a brass farthing what any meeting in Ballinascroon thinks, or what the whole of the three hundred and eighty electors think about me. I consider it a disgrace to the British constitution that such a rotten and corrupt constituency should exist. Three hundred and eighty electors—a population of less than five thousand—and a man spends close on £11,000 in contesting the place! Disfranchisement is too good for such a hole: it should be burned out of the political map. And so you took me as a stopgap. That was how you showed your gratitude to Mr. Glynne—who was a young man, and a foolish young man, and allowed himself to be led by your precious electoral agents. Of course I was to give up the seat to him at the next General Election. Very well, I have no objection to that: that is a matter between him and me; though I fancy you'll find him just as resolved as myself not to swallow your Home Rule bolus. But, as between you and me, the case is different. You wished to make use of me: I have made use of you. I have got into the House; I have learnt

something of its ways ; I have served so far a short apprenticeship. But do you think that I am going to give up my time, and my convictions, to your wretched projects ? Do you think I would bolster up your industries, that are dwindling only through laziness ? Do you think I am going to try to get every man of you a post or a pension ? Gracious heavens ! I don't believe there is a man-child born in the town but you begin to wonder what the Government will do for him. The very stones of Westminster Hall are saturated with Irish brogue ; the air is thick with your clamour for place. No—no, thank you ; don't imagine I am going to dip my hands into that dirty water.. You can turn me out at the end of this Parliament — I should have resigned my seat in any case—but until that time I am Hugh Balfour, and not at all your very obedient servant.”

For the moment his Celtic pulse had got the better of his Saxon brain. The deputation had had not at all been prepared for this scornful outburst ; they had expected to enjoy a monopoly of scolding. Ordinarily, indeed, Hugh

Balfour was an extremely reticent man; some said he was too proud to bother himself into a passion about anything or anybody.

“Sorr,” said the pink-faced orator, with a despairing hesitation in his voice, “after the language, sorr, which we have just heard, my friends and myself have but one course to pursue. I am astonished—I am astounded, sorr—that, holding such opinions of the borough of Ballinascroon as those you have now expressed, you should continue to represent that borough in Parliament——”

“I beg your pardon,” said Balfour, with his ordinary coolness, and taking out his watch, “if I must interrupt you again. I have but three minutes left. Is there anything definite that you wish to say to me?”

Once more there was a murmuring chorus of “Resign! resign!”

“I don’t at all mean to resign,” said Balfour, calmly.

“Sorr, it is inconceivable,” began the spokesman of the party, “that a gentleman should sit in Parliament to represent a constituency of

which he has such opinions as those that have fallen from you this day——”

“I beg your pardon; it is not at all inconceivable; it is the fact. What is more, I mean to represent your precious borough until the end of the present Parliament. You will be glad to hear that that end may be somewhat nearer than many people imagine; and again the bother comes from your side of the water. Since the Government were beaten on their Irish Universities Bill they have been in a bad way—there is no doubt of it. Some folks say there will be a dissolution in the Autumn. So you see there is no saying how soon you may get rid of me. In that case, will you return Mr Glynne?”

Again there was a murmur; but scarcely an intelligible one.

“I thought not. I fancied your gratitude for the £11,000 would not last as long. Well, you must try to find a Home Rule candidate who will keep the town drunk for three months at a stretch. Meantime, gentlemen, I am afraid I must bid you good morning.”

He rang the bell.

“ Cab there, Jackson ? ”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ Good morning, gentlemen.”

With that the deputation from Ballinascroon were left to take their departure at their own convenience ; their representative in Parliament driving off in a hansom to Paddington Station.

He had scarcely driven away from the door when his thoughts were occupied by much more important affairs. He was a busy man. The deputation could lie by as a joke.

Arrived at the station, Balfour jumped out, bag in hand, and gave the cabman eighteen-pence.

“ What’s this, sir ? ” the man called out, affecting to stare at the two coins.

Balfour turned.

“ Oh,” said he, innocently, “ have I made a mistake ? Let me see. You had better give me back the sixpence.”

Still more innocently the cabman—never doubting but that a gentleman who lived in

Piccadilly would act as such—handed him the sixpence, which Balfour put in his pocket.

“Don’t be such a fool next time,” said he, as he walked off to get his ticket.

He had a couple of minutes to spare, and after having taken his seat, he walked across the platform to get an evening paper. He was met by an old college companion of his.

“Balfour,” said he, “I wanted to see you. You remember that tall waiter at the Oxford and Cambridge—the one who got ill—had to give up—”

“And you got him into some greengrocery business or other. Yes.”

“Well, he is desperately ill now, and his affairs are at the worst. His wife doesn’t know what to do. I am getting up a little subscription for her. I want a couple of guineas from you.”

“Oh,” said Balfour, somewhat coldly. “I rather dislike the notion of giving money to these subscriptions, without knowing something of the case. I have known so many dying people get rapidly better after they got a pension from

the Civil List, or a donation from the Literary Fund, or a purse from their friends. Where does the woman live ? ”

“ Three, Marquis Street, Lambeth.”

“ Take your seats, please ! ”

So these two parted ; and Balfour’s acquaintance went back to the carriage, in which he had left his wife and her sisters, and to these he said,—

“ Did you ever know anything like the meanness of those Scotch ? I have just met that fellow Balfour—he has thirty thousand a year if he has a penny—and I couldn’t screw a couple of guineas out of him for a poor woman whose husband is dying. Fancy ! Now I can believe all the stories I have heard of him within the last year or two. He asks men to dinner ; has champagne on the sideboard ; pretends he is so busy talking politics that he forgets all about it ; his guests have to content themselves with a glass of sherry, while he has a little claret and water. He hasn’t a cigar in the house. He keeps one horse, I believe—an old cob—for pounding up and down in Hyde Park of a morning ; but on

his thirty thousand a year he can't afford himself a brougham. No wonder those Scotch fellows become rich men. I have no doubt his father began with picking up pins in the street."

Quite unconscious of having provoked all this wrathful animadversion, Balfour was already deeply immersed in certain Local Taxation Bills he had taken out of his bag. Very little did he see of the beautiful landscapes through which the train whirled on that bright and glowing afternoon; although, of course, he had a glance at Pangbourne; that was something not to be missed even by a young and enthusiastic politician. At the Oxford Station he was met by a thin, little, middle-aged man, with a big head and blue spectacles. This was the Rev. Henry Jewsbury, M.A., and Fellow of Exeter.

"Well, Balfour, my boy," called out this clergyman, in a rich and jovial voice which startled one as it came from that shrunken body, "I am glad to see you. How late you are! You'll just be in time to dine in hall: I will lend you a gown."

"All right. But I must send off a telegram first."

He went to the office. This was the telegram:—*H. Balfour, Exeter College, Oxford, to E. Jackson, — Piccadilly, London. Go to three Marquis Street, Lambeth; make inquiries if woman in great distress. Give ten pounds. Make strict inquiries.*

"Now, Jewsbury, I am with you. I hope there are no men coming to your rooms to-night; I want to have a long talk with you about this Judicature business. Yes, and about something more important even than that."

The Rev. Mr. Jewsbury looked up.

"The fact is," said the young man with a smile, "I have been thinking of getting married."

CHAPTER IV.

ALMA MATER.

It was a singular change for this busy, hard-headed man to leave the whirl of London life—with its late nights at the House, its conversational breakfasts, its Wednesday and Saturday dinner parties and official receptions, and so forth, and so forth—to spend a quiet Sunday with his old friends of Exeter. The very room in which he now sat, waiting for Mr. Jewsbury to hunt him out a gown, had once been his own. It overlooked the Fellows' Garden ; that sacred haunt of peace, and twilight, and green leaves. Once upon a time, and that not very long ago, it was pretty well-known that Balfour of Exeter might have had a Fellowship presented to him had he not happened to be too rich a man. No one, of course, could have imagined for a

moment this ambitious, eager, active young fellow suddenly giving up his wealth, and his chances of marrying, and his political prospects, in order that he might lead a quiet student life within the shadow of these grey walls. Nevertheless, that dream had crossed his mind more than once: most commonly when he had got home from the House about two in the morning, tired out, vexed with the failure of some pet project, unnerved by the apathy of the time, the Government he supported being merely a Government of sufferance, holding office only because the rival party was too weak to relieve it from the burden.

And indeed there was something of the home-returning feeling in his mind as he now slipped on the academical gown and hurried across to the great yellow-white hall, in which the undergraduates were already busy with their modest beef and ale. There were unknown faces, it is true, ranged by the long tables; but up here on the cross table, on the platform, he was among old friends; and there were old friends, too, looking over at him from the dusty frames

on the walls. He was something of a lion now. He had been a marked man at Oxford ; for, although he had never made the gallery of the Union tremble with resonant eloquence—he was, in fact, anything but a fluent speaker—he had abundant self-possession, and a tolerably keen instinct of detecting the weak points in his opponent's line of argument. Besides—and this goes for something—there was an impress of power in the mere appearance of the man, in his square forehead, his firm lips, and deep-set, keen, grey eyes. He had an iron frame, too—lean, bony, capable of enduring any fatigue. Of course the destination of such a man was politics. Could any one imagine him letting his life slip away from him in these quiet halls, mumbling out a lecture to a dozen ignorant young men in the morning, pacing up and down Addison's Walk in the afternoon, and glad to see the twilight come over as he sat in the common room of an evening, with claret and cherries, and a cold wind blowing in from the Fellows' Garden ?

It was to this quiet little low-roofed common

room they now adjourned when dinner in hall was over, and the undergraduates had gone noiselessly off, like so many rabbits, to their respective burrows. There were not more than a dozen round the polished mahogany table. The candles were not lit; there was still a pale light shining over the still garden outside, its beautiful green foliage enclosed on one side by the ivied wall of the Bodleian, and just giving one a glimpse of the Radcliffe dome beyond. It was fresh, and cool, and sweet in here; it was a time for wine and fruit; there were no raised voices in the talk, for there was scarcely a whisper among the leaves of the laburnums outside, and the great acacia spread its feathery branches into a cloudless and lambent sky.

“Well, Mr. Balfour,” said an amiable old gentleman, “and what do the Government mean to do with us now?”

“I should think, sir,” said Mr. Balfour, modestly, “that if the Government had their wish they would like to be drinking wine with you at this moment. It would be charitable to

ask them to spend an evening like this with you. They have had sore times of it of late; and their unpopularity is growing greater every day—why I don't know. I suppose they have been too much in earnest. The English public likes a joke now and again in the conduct of its affairs. No English Cabinet should be made up without its buffoon—unless, indeed, the Prime Minister can assume the part occasionally. Insincerity, impertinence, maladministration—anything will be forgiven you, if you can make the House laugh. On the other hand, if you happen to be a very earnest person, if you are foolish enough to believe that there are great wrongs to be righted, and if you worry and bother the country with your sincerity, the country will take the first chance—no matter what services you have rendered it—of kicking you out of office. It is natural enough. No one likes to be bothered by serious people. As we are all quite content, why should we be badgered with new projects? May I ask you to hand me those strawberries?"

The old gentleman was rather mystified; but

Mr. Jewsbury was not—he was listening with some impatience.

“They tell me, Mr. Balfour,” said the old gentleman, “that if there should be a General Election, your seat may be in danger.”

“Oh, I shall be turned out, I know,” said Balfour, with great simplicity. “My constituents don’t lose many opportunities of letting me know that. They burnt me in effigy the other night. I have had letters warning me that I had better give Ballinascroon a wide berth if I happened to be in that part of Ireland. But I daresay I shall get in for some other place; I might say that, according to modern notions, the money left me by my father entitles me to a seat. You know how things go together. If you open a system of drainage works, you become a knight. If you give a big dinner to a foreign prince, you become a baronet. If you could only buy Arundel Castle, you would be an earl. And as I see all round me in Parliament men who have no possible claim to be there except the possession of a big fortune—men who go into Parliament not to

help in governing the country at all, but merely to acquire a social distinction to which their money entitles them—I suppose I have that right too? Unfortunately I have not a local habitation and a name anywhere. I must begin and cultivate some place—buy a brewery, or something like that. Regattas are good things—you can spend a good deal of money safely on regattas——”

“Balfour,” cried Jewsbury, with a laugh, “don’t go on talking like that.”

“I tell you,” said the young man, seriously, “there was not half as much mischief done by the old pocket borough system as there is by this money qualification. For my part, I am Tory enough to prefer the old pocket-borough system, with all its abuses. The patrons were men of good birth, who had therefore leisure to attend to public affairs—in fact, they had the tradition that they were responsible for the proper government of the country. They had some measure of education—experience of other countries—an acquaintance with the political experiments of former times, and so forth. So

long as they could present a living—a seat in the House, I mean—a young fellow of ability had a chance, though he had not a penny in his pocket. What chance has he now? Is it for the benefit of the country that men like — and — should be running about from one constituency to another, getting beaten every time; while such brainless and voiceless nonentities as — and — are carried triumphantly into Parliament on the shoulders of a crowd of publicans? What is the result? You are degrading Parliament in public estimation. The average member has become a byword. The men who by education and experience are best fitted to look after the government of a nation are becoming less and less anxious to demean themselves by courting the suffrages of a mob; while the h-less men who are getting into Parliament on the strength of their having grown rich are bringing the House of Commons down to the level of a vestry. Might I trouble you for those strawberries?"

The old gentleman had quite forgotten about the strawberries. He had been listening in-

tently to this scornful protest. When Balfour spoke earnestly—whether advancing a mere paradox or not—there was a certain glow in the deep-set eyes that exercised a singular fascination over some people. It held them. They had to listen, whether they went away convinced or no.

“What an extraordinary fellow you are, Balfour,” said his friend to him, as they were on their way from the common room to Mr. Jewsbury’s easy-chairs and tobacco. “Here you have been inveighing against the money qualification of Members of Parliament, and you yourself propose to get into the House simply on the strength of your money !”

“Why not ?” said the young man. “If my constituents are satisfied, so am I. If that is their theory, I accept it. You called me no end of names because I took the seat those people at Ballinascroon offered me. I was reaping the harvest sown by bribery and I don’t know what. But that was their business, not mine. I merely made use of them, as I told a deputation from them this very forenoon. I have not given

them a penny. What I might have given—if there was a chance of my getting in again, and I could do it safely—I don't know."

"Always the same!" exclaimed his friend, as they were going up the narrow wooden stairs. "When you are a little older, Balfour, you will learn the imprudence of always attributing to yourself the meanest motives for your conduct. The world takes men at their own valuation of themselves. How would you like other people to say of you what you say yourself?"

There was no answer to this remark, for now the two friends had entered the larger of Mr. Jewsbury's two rooms—a sufficiently spacious apartment, decorated in the severe modern style, but still offering some compromise to human weakness in the presence of several low, long, and lounging easy-chairs. Moreover, there were pipes and a stone canister of tobacco on a small table. Mr. Jewsbury lit a couple of candles.

"Now," said he, dropping into one of the easy-chairs, and taking up a pipe, "I won't

listen for a moment to your Judicature Bill, or any other Bill; and I won't bore you for a moment with any gigantic scheme for reforming the college revenues and endowing scientific research. I want to know more about what you said at the station. Who is it?"

The young man almost started up in his chair — he leaned forward — there was an eager, bright light in his face.

"Jewsbury, if you only knew this girl—not to look at her merely, but to know her nature—if you could only imagine—." Then he sank back again in his chair, and put his hands in his pockets. "What is the use of my talking about her? You see, it will be a very advantageous thing for me if I can persuade this girl to marry me—very advantageous. Her father is a poor man; but then he is an earl—I may as well tell you his name, it is Lord Willowby—and he has got valuable connections. Willowby is not much in the Lords. To tell you the truth, I dislike him. He is tricky, and meddles with companies—perhaps that is to be forgiven him, for he hasn't a penny. But he could be of use

to me. And his daughter could be of greater use, if she were my wife. Lady Sylvia Balfour could get a better grip of certain people than plain Mr. Hugh——”

His companion had risen from his chair, and was impatiently pacing up and down the floor.

“Balfour,” he cried out, “I am getting tired of this. You know you are only shamming. You are the last man in the world to marry for those miserable motives you are now talking about——”

“I am not shamming at all,” said Balfour, calmly. “I am only looking at the business side of this question. What other would you like to hear about? I don’t choose to talk about the girl herself—until you have known her; and then I may tell you what I think about her. Sit down, like a good fellow. Is it my fault that I am ambitious?—that I want to do something in politics?”

His friend sat down resignedly.

“She has accepted you?” he said.

“Not openly—not confessedly,” said the young man; and then his breath began to come

and go a little more rapidly. "But—but she could not mistake what I have said to her—if she had been angry, she would have sent me off—on the contrary, it is only because I don't wish to annoy her by undue precipitancy—but I think we both understand."

"And her father?"

"Oh, I suppose her father understands too," said Balfour, carelessly. "I suppose I shall have to ask him formally. I wish to heaven he would not have his name mixed up with those companies."

"The Lady Sylvia—it is a pretty name," said his friend, absently.

"And she is as sweet, and pure, and noble as her name is beautiful," said Balfour, with a sudden proud light in his eyes—forgetting, indeed, in this one outburst all his schooled reticence. "You have no idea, Jewsbury, what a woman can be until you have known this one. I can tell you it will be something for a man that has to muddle about in the hypocrisies of politics, and to mix among the cynicisms, and affectations, and mean estimates of society, to find at

home—always by him—one clear burning lamp of faith—faith in human nature, and a future worth striving for. You don't suppose that this girl is any of the painted fripperies you meet at every woman's house in London. Good God! before I would marry one of those bedizened and microcephalous playthings——”

He sank back in his easy-chair again, with a shrug and a laugh. The laugh was against himself; he had been betrayed into a useless vehemence.

“The fact is,” said he, “Jewsbury, I am not fair to London women—or rather, I mean to those London girls who have been out a few seasons and know a good deal more than their mothers ever knew before them. Fortunately, the young men they are likely to marry are fit matches for them. They are animated by the same desire—the chief desire of their lives—and that is to escape the curse imposed on the human race at the gates of Paradise.”

“The curse was double,” said his clerical friend, with a laugh.

“I know,” said Balfour, coolly, “and I main-

tain what I say. There is no use beating about the bush."

Indeed, he had never been in the habit of beating about the bush. For him, what was, was ; and he had never tried to escape the recognition of it in a haze of words. Hence the reputation he enjoyed of being something more than blunt-spoken—of being, in fact, a pretty good specimen of the perfervid Scotchman, arrogant, opinionated, supercilious, and a trifle too anxious to tread on other people's corns.

"Do you see," he said, suddenly, after a second or two of quiet, "what Lady —— has done for her husband ? She fairly carried him into office on the strength of her dinners and parties ; and now she has *bardinaged* him into a peerage. She is a wonderfully clever woman. She can make a newspaper editor fancy himself a duke. By the way, I see the Prince has taken to the newspapers lately ; they are all represented at his garden parties. If you have a clever wife, it is wonderful what she can do for you."

"And if you have a stupid wife, can you do anything for her ?" inquired Mr. Jewsbury, to

whom all this business—this theatrical “business” of public life—was rather unintelligible.

Balfour burst out laughing.

“ What would you think of a Cabinet Minister being led by the nose—what would you think of his resigning the whole of his authority into the hands of the Permanent Secretary under him—simply because that Secretary undertakes the duty of getting the Minister’s wife, who is not very presentable, included in invitations, and passed into houses where she would never otherwise be seen ? She is a wonderful woman, that woman. They call her Mrs. Malaprop. But Tommy Bingham gets her taken about somehow.”

The two friends smoked in silence for some time ; the Irish Universities, the High Court of Judicature, the Endowment of Research may perhaps have been occupying their attention. But when Balfour spoke next, he said, slowly :—

“ It must be a good thing for a man to have a woman beside him whose very presence will make the world sweet and wholesome to him. If it were not for a woman here or there—and

it is only by accident they reveal themselves to you—what *could* one think of human nature?"

"And when are you to see this wonderful rose, that is able to sweeten all the winds of the world?" his friend asked, with a smile.

"I am going down with Lord Willowby on Monday for a few days. I should not wonder if something happened during that time."

CHAPTER V.

POLITICS AND NIGHTINGALES.

THE Lady Sylvia was seated before a mirror, and her maid was dressing her hair. The maid was a shrewd, kindly, elderly person, who exercised a good deal of control over her young mistress, and at this moment she was gently remonstrating with her for her impatience.

“I am sure, my lady, they cannot be here for half an hour yet,” said she.

“And if I am too soon?” said the young lady, with just a trifle of petulance. “I wish to be too soon.”

The maid received this admonition with much composure, and was not driven by it into scamping her work. In truth, it was not she who was responsible for the hurry, if hurry there had to be. There was a book lying on the table. It

was a description of the three Khanates of Turkistan, when as yet these were existing and independent States. That was not the sort of book that ordinarily keeps a young lady late for dressing ; but then there was a considerable talk at this time about the advance of General Kaufmann on Khiva ; and as there was a member of the House of Commons coming to dine that evening with a member of the House of Lords, they might very probably refer to the matter ; and in that case ought not a certain young lady to be able to follow the conversation with something of intelligent interest, when even her school-boy cousin, Johnnie Blythe, could prattle away about foreign politics for half an hour at a stretch ?

“ Thank you, Anne,” said she, meekly, when the finishing touch was put to her dress ; and a couple of minutes afterwards she was standing out of doors, on the grey stone steps, in the warm sunset glow.

She made a pretty picture, as she stood there, listening and expectant. She was dressed in a tight-fitting, tight-sleeved dress of cream-white

silk, and there was not a scrap of colour, or ribbon, or ornament about it. She wore no jewellery ; there was not even a soft, thin line of gold round her neck. But there was a white rose in her brown hair.

Suddenly she heard a sound of wheels in the distance ; her heart began to throb a bit, and there was a faint flush of colour in the pale, and calm, and serious face. But the next minute that flush had died away, and only one who knew her well could have told that the girl was somewhat excited, by the fact that the dark pupils of the grey eyes seemed a trifle larger than usual, and full of a warm, anxious, glad light.

She caught sight of the wagonette as it came rolling along the avenue between the elms. A quick look of pleasure flashed across her face. Then the small, white, trembling fingers were nervously closed, and a great fear possessed her lest she might too openly betray the gladness that wholly filled her heart.

“ How do you do, Lady Sylvia ? ” cried Hugh Balfour, with more brightness than was usual

with him, as he came up the stone steps, and shook hands with her.

He was surprised and chagrined by the coldness of her manner. She caught his eyes but for a moment, and then averted hers, and she seemed to withdraw her hand quickly from his hearty and friendly grasp. Then why should she so quickly turn to her father, and hope he was not tired by his stay in London ? That was but scant courtesy to a guest ; she had scarcely said a word to him ; and her manner seemed either extremely nervous or studiously distant.

Lord Willowby—a tall, thin, sallow-faced man, who stooped a little and was slightly lame —kissed her, and bestowed upon her a ferocious smile. That smile of his lordship's, once seen, was not to be forgotten. If Johnnie Blythe had had any eye for the similitudes in things ; if he had himself poured out a glass of the mysterious and frothy fluid he had bought at the “ Fox and Hounds ;” if he had observed how the froth hissed up suddenly in the glass, and how it instantly disappeared again, leaving only a blank dulness of liquid ; then he might have been able

to say what his uncle's smile was like. It was a prodigious grin rather than a smile. It flamed and shot all over his contorted visage, wrinkling up his eyes, and revealing his teeth ; then it instantaneously disappeared, leaving behind it the normal gloom and depression of distinctly melancholy features.

"I hope you enjoyed the drive over from the station," said Lady Sylvia, in a timid voice, to Mr. Balfour ; but her eyes were still cast down.

He dared not tell her that he had not consciously seen a single natural object all the way over ; so full was his heart of the end and aim of the journey.

"Oh, beautiful—beautiful," said he. "It is a charming country. I am more and more delighted with it each time I see it. Is not that —surely that is Windsor ? "

All over the western sky there was a dusky blaze of red ; and at the far horizon-line, above the dark blue woods, there was a tiny line of transparent brown—apparently about an inch in length—with a small projection just visible

at each end. It was Windsor Castle ; but he did not look long at Windsor Castle. The girl had now turned her eyes in that direction too ; he had a glimpse of those wonderful clear depths under the soft dark eyelashes ; the pale, serious, beautiful face caught a touch of colour from the glow in the west. But why should she be so cold, so distant, so afraid ? When they went into the Hall, he followed mechanically the man who had been told off to wait on him. He said nothing in reply when he heard that dinner was at seven. He could not understand in what way he had offended her.

Mechanically, too, he dressed. Surely it was nothing he had said in the House ? That was too absurd : how could Lady Sylvia, brought up as she had been, care about what was said or done in Parliament ? And then he grew to wonder at himself. He was more disturbed by a slight change of manner in this girl than by anything that had happened to him for years. He was a man of good nerve and fair self-confidence. He was not much depressed by the hard things his constituents said of him. If a Minister

snubbed him in answer to a question, he took the snub with much composure ; and his knowledge that it would appear in all the papers next morning did not at all interfere with his dinner of that evening. But now, had it come to this already, that he should become anxious, disturbed, restless, merely because a girl had turned away her eyes when she spoke to him ?

The dinner gong was sounding as he went downstairs. He found Lord Willowby and his daughter in the drawing-room — a spacious poorly-furnished chamber that was kept pretty much in shadow by a large chestnut-tree just outside the windows. Then a servant threw open the great doors, and they went into the dining-room. This, too, was a large, airy, poorly-furnished room ; but what did that matter when the red light from the west was painting great squares of beautiful colour on the walls, and when one could look from the windows away over the level country that was now becoming blue and misty under the dying glow of the sunset ? They had not lit the candles as yet ; the fading sunlight was enough.

"My dear fellow," remonstrated Lord Willowby, when the servant had offered Balfour two or three sorts of wine, he refusing them all, "what can I get for you?"

"Nothing, thank you. I rarely drink wine," he said carelessly; "I think, Lady Sylvia, you said the archery meeting was on Wednesday?"

Now here occurred a strange thing, which was continued all through dinner. Lady Sylvia had apparently abandoned her reserve. She was talking freely, sometimes eagerly, and doing what she could to entertain her guest. But why was it that she resolutely refused to hear Balfour's praises of the quiet and beautiful influences of a country life; and would have nothing to do with archery-meetings, and croquet parties, and such trivialities; but on the contrary was anxious to know all about the chances of the Government—whether it was really unpopular—why the Conservatives had refused to take office—when the dissolution was expected—what the appeal to the country on the part of Ministers would probably be.

So much for her. Her desire to be instructed

in these matters was almost pathetic. If her heart could not be said to beat with the great heart of the people, that was not her fault; for to her the mass of her fellow-countrymen was but an abstract expression that she saw in the newspapers. But surely she could feel and give utterance to a warm interest in public affairs, and a warm sympathy with those who were giving up day and night to the thankless duties of legislation?

Now, as for him. He was all for the country and green fields—for peace and grateful silence—for quiet days, and books, and the singing of birds. What was the good of that turmoil they called public life? What effect could be produced on the character by regarding constantly that clamorous whirl of eager self-interest, of mean ambitions, of hypocrisy, and brazen impudence, and ingratitude? Far better, surely, the independence and self-respect of a private life; the purer social and physical atmosphere of the still country ways; the simple pleasures, the freedom from care, the content

It was not a discussion ; it was a series of suggestions, of half-declared preferences. Lord Willowby did not speak much. He was a melancholy-faced man ; and apathetic until there occurred the chance of his getting a few pounds out of you. Lady Sylvia and Mr. Balfour had most of the conversation to themselves ; and the manner of it has just been indicated.

Mr. Balfour would know all about the church to which this young lady went. Was it High or Low, ancient or modern ? Had she tried her hand at altar-screens ? Did she help in the Christmas decorations ? Lady Sylvia replied to these questions briefly. She appeared far more interested in the free fight then going on between Cardinal Cullen and Mr. O'Keefe. What was Mr. Balfour's opinion as to the jurisdiction of the Pope in Ireland ?

Mr. Balfour was greatly charmed by the look of the old-fashioned inn they had passed—was it the “Fox and Hounds” ? It was so picturesquely situated on the high bank at the top of the hill. Of course, Lady Sylvia had noticed the curious painting on the signboard. Lady

Sylvia, looking very wise, and profound, and serious, seemed rather anxious to know what were the chances of the Permissive Bill ever being passed; and what effect did Mr. Balfour think that would have on the country. She was quite convinced—this person of large experience of gaols, reformatories, police-stations, and the like—that by far the greater proportion of the crimes committed in this country were the result of drinking. On the other hand, she complained that so many conflicting statements were made. How was one to get to know how the Permissive Bill principle had worked in Maine?

Lord Willowby only stared at first: then he began to be amused. Where the devil (this was what he thought) had his daughter picked up these notions? They were not, so far as he knew, contained in any schoolroom “Treasury of Knowledge.”

As the red light faded out in the west, and a clear twilight filled the sky, it seemed to Balfour that there was something strange and mystical in the face of the girl sitting opposite to him. With those earnest and beautiful eyes, and

those proud and sensitive lips, she might have been an inspired poetess or prophetess, he imagined ; leading her disciples and worshippers by the earnestness of her look, and the grave, sweet melody of her voice. As the twilight grew greyer within the room, this magnetic influence seemed to grow stronger and stronger. He could have believed there was a subtle light shining in that pale face. He was, indeed, in something like a trance when the servants brought in the candles ; and then, when he saw the warmer light touch this magical and mystic face, and when he discovered that Lady Sylvia was now less inclined to let her eyes meet his, it was with a great regret he bade good-bye to the lingering and solemn twilight and the vision it had contained.

Lady Sylvia rose to withdraw from the table.

“ Do you know,” said she to Mr. Balfour, “ this is the most beautiful time of the day with us. Papa and I always have a walk through the trees after dinner in the evening. Don’t let him sit long.”

"As for myself," said Balfour, promptly—he was standing at the time—"I never drink wine after dinner ——"

"And you never drink wine during dinner," said his host, with a sudden and fierce smile, that instantly vanished. "Sit down, Balfour. You must at least try a glass of that Madeira."

"Thank you, I am not thirsty," said the younger man, with great simplicity. "Really, I would just as soon go out now——"

"Oh, by all means," said his host, good-naturedly. "But don't hurry any other man's cattle. Sylvia will take you for a stroll to the lake and back—perhaps you may hear a nightingale. I shall join you presently."

Of course it was with the deepest chagrin that the young man found himself compelled to accept of this fair escort; and of course it was with the greatest reluctance that Lady Sylvia threw a light scarf over her head and led the way out into the cool clear evening. The birds were silent now. There was a pale glow in the north-western skies; and that again was reflected on the still bosom of the lake. As they

walked along the high stone terrace, they caught sight of the first trembling star, far over the great dark masses of the elms.

But in her innocent and eager desire to prove herself a woman of the world, she would not have it that there was any special beauty about this still night. The silence must be oppressive to him ; he would weary of this loneliness in a week. Was there any sight in the world to be compared to Piccadilly in the evening, with its twin rows of gas lamps falling and rising with the hollow and hill—and the whirl of carriages—the lighted windows—and the consciousness that you were in the very heart of the life and thinking and excitement of a great nation ?

“ We are going up the week after next,” said Lady Sylvia, “ to see the Academy. That is Wednesday the 21st; and we dine with my uncle in the evening.” Then she added timidly, “ Johnny told me they had sent you a card.”

He did not answer the implied question for a second or two. His heart was filled with rage and indignation. Was it fair—was it honour-

able—to let this innocent girl, who knew no more of London life or reputations than a child, go to dine at that house? Must not her father know very well that the conduct of Major the Honourable Stephen Blythe, in regard to a betting transaction, was at that very time under the consideration of the committee of the C—— club?

There was a good deal of fierce virtue about this young man; but it may be doubted if he would have been so indignant had any other girl told him merely that she was going to dine with her uncle—that uncle, moreover, being heir presumptive to an earldom, and not as yet convicted of having done anything unusually disreputable. But somehow the notion got into Balfour's head that this poor girl was not half well enough looked after. She was left here all by herself, when her father was enjoying himself in London. She needed more careful, and tender, and loving guidance. And so forth, and so forth. The anxiety young men show to undertake the protection of innocent maidens is quite touching.



"Yes," said he suddenly. "I shall dine with Major Blythe on the 21st."

He had that very day written to say he would not. But a shilling telegram would put that right; and would also enable Major Blythe to borrow a five-pound note from him on the first possible occasion.

And so these two walked together, on the high stone terrace, in the fading twilight, and under the gathering stars. And as they came near to one dark patch of shrubbery, lo! the strange silence was burst asunder by the rich, full song of a nightingale; and they stood still to hear. It was a song of love he sang—of love, and youth, and the delight of summer nights: how could they but stand still to hear?

CHAPTER VI.

FURTHER POLITICS AND NIGHTINGALES.

LORD WILLOWBY had fallen asleep. Through the white curtains of the window they could see him lying back in an easy-chair, a newspaper dropped on his knee. Why should they go in to wake him?

The wan light was dying away from the bosom of the lake down there, and there was less of a glow in the northern skies; but the stars were burning more clearly now—white and throbbing over the black foliage of the elms. The nightingale sang from time to time; and the woods were silent to hear. Now and again a cool breeze came through the bushes, bringing with it a scent of lilacs and sweet-briar. They were in no hurry to re-enter the house.

Balfour was talking a little more honestly and earnestly now; for he had begun to speak of his work, his aims, his hopes, his difficulties. It was not a romantic tale he had to tell on this beautiful night; but his companion conferred romance upon it. He was talking as an eager, busy, practical politician; she believed she was listening to a great statesman—to a leader of the future—to her country's one and only saviour. It was of no use that he insisted on the prosaic and commonplace nature of the actual work he had to do.

"You see, Lady Sylvia," he said, "I am only an apprentice as yet. I am only learning how to use my tools. And the fact is, there is not one man in fifty in the House who fancies that any tools are necessary. Look how on the most familiar subjects—those nearest to their own doors—they are content to take all their information from the reporters in the newspapers. They never think of inquiring, of seeing, for themselves. They work out legislation as a mere theorem; they have no idea how it is practically applied. They pass Adulteration Acts, Sanitary

Acts, Lodging-House Acts ; they consider Gas Bills, Water Bills, and what not ; but it is all done in the air. They don't know. Now I have been trying to cram on some of these things ; but I have avoided official reports. I know the pull it will give me to have actual and personal experience—this is in one direction only, you see—of the way the poorer people in a great town live : how taxation affects them, how the hospitals treat them, their relations with the police, and a hundred other things. Shall I tell you a secret ? ”

These were indeed pretty secrets to be told on this beautiful evening : secrets not of lovers' dreams and hopes, but secrets about Sanitary Acts and Municipal Bills.

“ I lived for a week in a court in Seven Dials, as a French polisher. Next week I am going to spend in a worse den—a haunt of thieves, tramps, and hawkers—a very pretty den, indeed, to be the property of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, and almost under the shadow of Westminster Abbey.”

She uttered a slight exclamation—of depreca-

tion and anxious fear. But he did not quite understand.

“ This time, however,” he continued, “ I shall be not so badly off; for I am going to live at a common lodging-house, and there the beds are pretty clean. I have been down and through the whole neighbourhood; and have laid my plans. I find that by paying eightpence a night—instead of fourpence—I shall have one of the married people’s rooms to myself, instead of having to sleep in a common room. There will be little trouble about it. I shall be a hawker, my stock-in-trade, a basket; and if I disappear at three in the morning—going off to Covent Garden, you know—they won’t expect to see me again till nine or ten in the evening, when they meet in the kitchen to smoke and drink beer. It is then I hope to get all the information I want. You see there will be no great hardship. I shall be able to slip home in the morning, get washed, and a sleep. The rooms in these common lodging-houses are very fairly clean; the police supervision is very strict.”

“ It is not the hardship,” said Lady Sylvia to her companion, and her breath came and went somewhat more quickly, “ it is the danger—you will be quite alone—among such people.”

“ Oh,” said he, lightly, “ there is no danger at all. Besides, I have an ally—the great and powerful Mrs. Grace. Shall I tell you about Mrs. Grace, the owner of pretty nearly half of Happiness Alley ?”

The Lady Sylvia would hear something of this person with the pretty name, who lived in that favoured alley.

“ I was wandering through the courts and lanes down there one day,” said Balfour, “ and I was having a bad time of it; for I had a tall hat on, which the people regarded as ludicrous, and they poured scorn and contempt on me, and one or two of the women at the windows above threw things at my hat. However, as I was passing one door, I saw a very strong-built woman suddenly come out, and she threw a basket into the middle of the lane. Then she went back, and presently she appeared again, simply shoving before her—her hand on his

collar—a man who was certainly as big as herself. ‘ You clear out,’ she said ; and then with one arm—it was bare and pretty muscular—she shot him straight after the basket. Well, the man was a meek man, and did not say a word. I said to her, ‘ Is that your husband you are treating so badly ? ’ Of course I kept out of the reach of her arm, for women who are quarrelling with their husbands are pretty free with their hands. But this woman, although she had a firm, resolute face, and a grey moustache, was as cool and collected as a judge. ‘ Oh, dear, no,’ she said, ‘ that is one of my tenants. He can’t pay, so he’s got to get out.’ On the strength of this introduction I made the acquaintance of Mrs. Grace, who is really a most remarkable woman. I suppose she is a widow, for she hasn’t a single relative in the world. She has gone on taking house after house, letting the rooms, collecting her rents, and her nightly fees for lodgers, and looking after her property generally with a decision and ability quite out of the ordinary. I don’t suppose she loses a shilling in the month by bad

debts. ‘Pay, or out you go,’ is her motto with her tenants; ‘Pay first, or you can’t come in,’ she says to her lodgers. She has been an invaluable ally to me, that woman. I have gone through the most frightful dens with her, and there was scarcely a word said; she is not a woman to stand any nonsense. And then, of course, her having amassed this property, six-pence by sixpence, has made her anxious to know the conditions on which all the property around her is held, and she has a remarkably quick and shrewd eye for things. Once, I remember, we had been exploring a number of houses that were in an infamous condition. ‘Well,’ I said to her, ‘how do the Sanitary Inspectors pass this over?’ She answered that the Sanitary Inspectors were only the servants of the Medical Officer of Health. ‘Very well, then,’ I said, ‘why doesn’t the Medical Officer of Health act?’ You should have seen the cool frankness with which she looked at me. ‘You see, sir,’ she said, ‘the Medical Officer of Health is appointed by the vestry; and these houses are the property of Mr. ——, who is a vestry-

man ; and if he was made to put them to-rights, he might as well pull them down altogether. So I suppose, sir, the inspectors don't say much ; and the Medical Officer he doesn't say anything ; and Mr. —— is not put to any trouble.' There is nothing of that sort about Mrs. Grace's property. It is the cleanest bit of whitewash in Westminster. And the way she looks after the water-supply—— But really, Lady Sylvia, I must apologize to you for talking to you about such uninteresting things——"

"Oh, I assure you," said the girl, earnestly and honestly, "that I am deeply interested—intensely interested ; but it is all so strange and terrible. If—if I knew Mrs. Grace, I would like to—to send her a present."

It never occurred to Balfour to ask himself why Lady Sylvia Blythe should like to send a present to a woman living in one of the slums of Westminster. Had the girl a wild notion that by a gift she could bribe the virago of Happiness Alley to keep watch and ward over a certain audacious young man who wanted to become a Parliamentary Haroun al Raschid ?

"Mr. Balfour," said Lady Sylvia, suddenly, "have you asked this Mrs. Grace about the prudence of your going into the lodging-house?"

"Oh, yes, I have got a lot of slang terms from her—hawker's slang, you know. And she is to get me my suit of clothes, and the basket."

"But surely they will recognize you as having been down there before."

"Not a bit. I shall have my face plentifully begrimed; and there is no better disguise for a man than his taking off his collar and tying a wisp of black ribbon round his neck instead. Then I can smoke pretty steadily; and I need not talk much in the kitchen of an evening. But why should I bother you with these things, Lady Sylvia? I only wanted to show you a very small bit of the training that I think a man should go through before he gets up in Parliament with some delightfully accurate scheme in his hand for the amelioration of millions of human beings—of whose condition he does not really know the smallest particular. It is not the picturesque side of legislation. It

is not heroic. But then if you want a fine, bold, ambitious flight of statesmanship you have only to go to Oxford or Cambridge; in every college you will find twenty young men ready to remodel the British Constitution in five minutes."

They walked once more up to the window; Lord Willowby was still asleep, in the hushed yellow-lit room. Had they been out a quarter of an hour—half an hour? It was impossible for them to say; their rapidly growing intimacy and friendly confidence took no heed of time.

"And it is very disheartening work," he added, with a sigh. "The degradation, physical and mental, you see on the faces you meet in these slums is terrible. You begin to despair of any legislation. Then the children—their white faces, their poor, stunted bodies, their weary eyes—thank God you have never seen that sight. I can stand most things—I am not a very soft-hearted person—but—but I can't stand the sight of those children."

She had never heard a man's sob before. She was terrified, overawed. But the next

moment he had burst into a laugh, and was talking in rather a gay and excited fashion.

“Yes,” said he, “I should like to have my try at heroic legislation too. I should like to be made absolute sovereign and autocrat of this country for one week. Do you know what I should do on day number one? I should go to the gentlemen who form the Court of the great City Guilds, and I would say to them, ‘Gentlemen, I assure you you would be far better in health and morals if you would cease to spend your revenues on banquets at five guineas a head. You have had quite as much of that as is good for you. Now I propose to take over the whole of the property at present in your hands; and if I find any reasonable bequest in favour of fishmongers, or skinners, or any other poor tradesman, that I will administer; but the rest of your wealth—it is only a trifle of twenty millions or so, capitalized—I mean to use for the benefit of yourselves and your fellow-citizens.’ Then, what next? I issue my edict, ‘There shall be no more slums. Every house of them must be razed to the ground, and the

sites turned into gardens, to tempt currents of air into the heart of the city.' But what of the dispossessed people? Why, I have got in my hands this twenty millions to whip them off to Nebraska and make of them great stock-raising communities on the richest grass-lands in the world. Did I tell you, Lady Sylvia," he added, seriously, "that I mean to hang all the directors of the existing water and gas companies?"

"No, you did not say that," she answered, with a smile. But she would not treat this matter altogether as a joke. It might please him to make fun of himself; in her inmost heart she believed that, if the country only gave him these unlimited powers for a single year, the millennium would *ipso facto* have arrived.

"And so," said he, after a time, "you see how I am situated. It is a poor business, this Parliamentary life. There is a great deal of mean and shabby work connected with it."

"I think it is the noblest work a man could put his hand to," she said, with a flush on her cheek that he could not see; "and the noble-

ness of it is that a man will go through the things you have described for the good of others. I don't call that mean or shabby work. I would call it mean or shabby if a man were building up a great fortune to spend on himself. If that was his object, what could be more mean? You go into slums and dens; you interest yourself in the poorest wretches that are alive; you give your days and your nights to studying what you can do for them; and you call all that care, and trouble, and self-sacrifice mean and shabby!"

"But you forget," said he, coldly, "what is my object. I am serving my apprenticeship. I want these facts for my own purposes. You pay a politician for his trouble by giving him a reputation, which is the object of his life——"

"Mr. Balfour," she said, proudly, "I don't know much about public men. You may say what you please about them. But I think I know a little about you. And it is useless your saying such things to me."

For a second he felt ashamed of his habit of

self-depreciation ; the courage of the girl was a rebuke—was an appeal to a higher candour.

“A man has need to beware,” he said. “It is safest to put the lowest construction on your own conduct ; it will not be much lower than that of the general opinion. But I did wrong, Lady Sylvia, in talking like that to you. You have a great faith in your friends. You could inspire any man with confidence in himself——”

He paused for a moment ; but it was not to hear the nightingale sing, or to listen to the whispering of the wind in the dark elms. It was to gain courage for a further frankness.

“It would be a good thing for the public life of this country,” said he, “if there were more women like you—ready to give generous encouragement, ready to believe in the disinterestedness of a man, and with a full faith in the usefulness of his work. I can imagine the good fortune of a man who, after being harassed and buffeted about—perhaps by his own self-criticism as much as by the opinions of others—could always find in his own home consolation, and trust, and courage. Look at his independ-

ence; he would be able to satisfy, or he would try to satisfy, one opinion that would be of more value to him than that of all the world beside. What would he care about the ingratitude of others, so long as he had his reward in his own home—— But it is a picture, a dream.”

“ Could a woman be all that to a man ? ” the girl asked, in a low voice.

“ You could,” said he, boldly, and he stopped and confronted her, and took both her trembling hands in his. “ Lady Sylvia, when I have dreamed that dream, it was your face I saw in it. You are the noblest woman I have known. I—well, I must say it now—I love you, and have loved you almost since the first moment I saw you. That is the truth. If I have pained you—well, you will forgive me after I have gone—and this will be the last of it——”

She had withdrawn her hands, and now stood before him, her eyes cast down, her heart beating so that she could not speak.

“ If I have pained you,” said he, after a moment or two of anxious silence, “ my pre-

sumption will bring its own punishment. Lady Sylvia, shall I take you back to the Hall?"

She put one hand lightly on his arm.

"I am afraid," she said, and he could but scarcely hear the low and trembling words. "How can I be to you—what you described? It is so much—I have never thought of it—and if I should fail to be all that you expect?"

He took her in his arms, and kissed her forehead.

"I have no fear. Will you try?"

"Yes," she answered—and now she looked up into his face, with her wet eyes full of love, and hope, and generous self-surrender. "I will try to be to you all that you could wish me to be."

"Sylvia, my wife!" was all he said in reply; and indeed there was not much need for further speech between these two. The silence of the beautiful night was eloquence enough. And then from time to time they had the clear, sweet singing of the nightingale, and the stirring of the night-wind among the trees.

By-and-by they went back to the Hall—they

walked arm-in-arm, with a great peace and joy in their hearts; and they re-entered the dining-room. Lord Willowby started up in his easy-chair, and rubbed his eyes.

“Bless me,” said he, with one of his violent smiles, “I have been asleep.”

His lordship was a peer of the realm, and his word must be taken. The fact was, however, that he had not been asleep at all.

CHAPTER VII.

A CONFESSTION OF FAITH.

LORD WILLOWBY guessed pretty accurately what had occurred. For a second or two his daughter sate down at the table, pale a little, silent, and nervously engaged in pulling a rose to pieces. Then she got up and proposed they should go into the drawing-room to have some tea. She led the way ; but, just as she had gone through, Balfour put his hand on Lord Willowby's arm and detained him.

At this juncture a properly-minded young man would have been meek and apologetic ; would have sworn eternal gratitude in return for the priceless gift he was going to demand ; would have made endless protestations as to the care with which he would guard that great treasure. But Mr. Hugh Balfour, M.P., was

not very good at sentiment. Added to the cool judgment of a man of the world, he had a certain forbidding reserve about him which was, perhaps, derived from his Scotch descent; and he knew a great deal more about his future father-in-law than that astute person imagined.

“Lord Willowby,” said he, “a word before we go in. You must have noticed my regard for your daughter; and you may have guessed what it might lead to. I presume it was not quite displeasing to you, or you would not have been so kind as to invite me here from time to time. Well, I owe you an apology for having spoken sooner than I intended to Lady Sylvia—I ought to have mentioned the matter to you first—”

“My dear fellow,” said Lord Willowby, seizing his hand, while all the features of his face were suddenly contorted into what he doubtless meant as an expression of rapturous joy, “not another word! Of course she accepted you—her feelings for you have long been known to me—and my child’s happiness I put before all other considerations. Balfour, you have

got a good girl to be your wife; take care of her."

"I think you may trust me for that," was the simple answer.

They went into the room. Not a word was said; but Lord Willowby went over to his daughter, and patted her on the back, and kissed her: then she knew. A servant brought in some tea.

It was a memorable evening. The joy within the young man's heart had to find some outlet; and he talked then as no one had ever heard him talk before—not even his more intimate friend at Exeter, when they used to sit discoursing into the small hours of the morning. Lord Willowby could not readily understand a man's being earnest or eloquent except under the influence of wine; but Balfour scarcely ever drank wine. Why should he be so vehement? He was not much of an orator in the House; in society he was ordinarily cold and silent. Now, however, he had grown indignant over a single phrase they had stumbled against—"you can't make men moral by Act of Parliament"—and

the grey eyes under the heavy eyebrows had an intense earnestness in them as he denounced what he chose to call a pernicious lie.

“ You *can* make men moral by Act of Parliament—by the action of Parliament,” he was insisting ; and there was one there who listened with wrapt attention and faith, even when he was uttering the most preposterous paradoxes, or giving way to the most violent prejudice, “ and the nation will have to answer for it that proceeds on any other belief. For what is morality but the perfect adjustment of the human organism to the actual conditions of life—the observance by the human being of those unchangeable, inexorable laws of the universe, to break which is death, physical or spiritual as the case may be ? What have all the teachers who have taught mankind—from Moses in his day to Carlyle in ours—been insisting on but that ? Moses was only a sort of Divine vestryman ; Carlyle has caught something of the poetry of the Hebrew prophets ; but it is the same thing they say. There are the fixed immutable laws : death awaits the nation or the man who breaks



them. Look at the lesson the world has just been reading. A liar, a perjurer, and traitor gets up in the night-time and cuts the throat of a nation. In the morning you find him wearing Imperial robes ; but if you looked you would find the skirts of them bespattered with the blood of the women and children he has had shot down in the street. Europe shudders a little, but goes on its way ; it has forgotten that the moment a crime is committed its punishment is already meted out. And what does the nation do that has been robbed and insulted—that has seen those innocent women and children shot down that the mean ambition of a liar might be satisfied ? It is quick to forgiveness ; for it finds itself tricked out in gay garments, and it has money put in its pocket, and it is bidden to dance and be merry. The *bourgeois* mind is instantly prostrated before the golden calf of commercial prosperity. Everything is to be condoned now ; for life has become like a masked ball—and it does not matter what thieves and swindlers there may be in the crowd, so long as there is plenty of brilliant lights, and music,

and wine. Lady Sylvia, do you know Alfred Rethel's 'Der Tod als Feind'?—Death coming in to smite down the maskers and the music-makers at a revel? It does not matter much who or what is the instrument of vengeance; but the vengeance is sure. When France was paying her penalty—when the chariot-wheels of God were grinding exceeding hard—she shrieked at her enemy, 'You are only a pack of Huns!' Well, Attila was a Hun, a barbarian, probably a superstitious savage. I don't know what particular sort of fetish he may have worshipped—what blurred image or idol he had in his mind of Him who is past finding out—but however rude or savage his notions were, he knew that the laws of God had been broken, and the time for vengeance had come. The Scourge of God may be Attila or another: an epidemic that slays its thousands because a nation has not been cleanly—the lacerating of a mother's heart when in her carelessness she has let her child cut its finger with a knife. The penalty has to be paid; sometimes at the moment, sometimes long after; for the sins of the fathers are visited

not only on their children, but on their children's children, and so on to the end, nature claiming her inexorable due. And when I go down to the slums I have been talking to you about, how dare I say that these wretched people, living in squalor and ignorance and misery, are only paying the penalty for their own mistakes and crimes ? You look at their narrow, retreating, monkey-like forehead, the heavy and hideous jowl, the thick neck, and the furtive eye ; you think of the foul air they have breathed from their infancy, of the bad water and unwholesome food they have consumed, of the dense ignorance in which they have been allowed to grow up ; and how can you say that their immoral existence is anything but inevitable ? I am talking about Westminster, Lord Willowby. From some parts of these slums you can see the towers of the Houses of Parliament, glittering in gilt, and looking very fine indeed. And if I declared my belief that the immorality of these wretched people of the slums lay as much at the door of the Houses of Parliament as at their own door, I suppose people

would say I was a rabid democrat, pandering to the passions of the poor to achieve some notoriety. But I believe it all the same. Wrong-doing—the breaking of the universal laws of existence—the subversion of those conditions which produce a settled, wholesome, orderly social life—is not necessarily personal ; it may be national ; it may have been continued through centuries, until the results have been so stamped into the character of the nation—or into the condition of a part of a nation—that they almost seem ineradicable. And so I say that you can, and do, make people moral, or immoral, by the action of Parliament. There is not an Education Bill, or a University Tests Bill, or an Industrial Dwellings Bill you pass which has not its effect, for good or ill, on the relations between the people of a country and those eternal laws of right which are for ever demanding fulfilment. Without some such fixed belief, how could any man spend his life in tinkering away at these continual experiments in legislation ? You would merely pass a vote trebling the police-force ; and have done with it."

Whether or not this vehement and violently prejudiced young man had quite convinced Lord Willowby, it was abundantly clear that he had long ago convinced himself. His eyes were "glowering," as the Scotch say; and he had forgotten all about the tea that Lady Sylvia herself had poured out and brought to him. The fact is, Lord Willowby had not paid much attention. He was thinking of something else. He perceived that the young man was in an emotional and enthusiastic mood; and he was wondering whether, in return for having just been presented with a wife, Mr. Hugh Balfour might not be induced to become a director of a certain company in which his lordship was interested, and which was sorely in need of help at that moment.

But Lady Sylvia was convinced. Here, indeed, was a confession of faith fit to come from the man whom she had just accepted as her husband. He had for the moment thrown off his customary garb of indifference or cynicism; he had revealed himself; he had spoken, with earnest voice and equally earnest eyes; and

to her the words were as the words of one inspired.

“Have you any more water-colour drawings to show me, Lady Sylvia?” he asked, suddenly.

A quick shade of surprise and disappointment passed over the calm and serious face. She knew why he had asked. He had imagined that these public affairs must be dull for her. He wished to speak to her about something more within her comprehension. She was hurt; and she walked a little proudly as she went to get the drawings.

“Here is the whole collection,” said she, indifferently. “I don’t remember which of them you saw before. I think I will bid you good night now.”

“I am afraid I have bored you terribly,” said he as he rose.

“You cannot bore me with subjects in which I take so deep an interest,” said she with some decision.

He took her hand, and bade her good-night. There was more in the look that passed be-

tween these two, than in a thousand effusive embraces.

“ Now, Balfour,” said his lordship, with unaccustomed gaiety, “ what do you say to changing our coats, and having a cigar in the library ? And a glass of grog ?—a Scotchman ought to know something about whiskey. Besides, you don’t win a wife every day.”

It was Lord Willowby who looked and talked as if he had just won a wife as the two men went up-stairs to the library. He very rarely smoked, but on this occasion he lit a cigarette; and he said he envied Balfour his enjoyment of that wooden pipe. Would his guest try something hot? No? Then Lord Willowby stretched out his legs, and laid back in the easy-chair, apparently greatly contented with himself and the world.

When the servant had finally gone, his lordship said :

“ How well you talked to-night, Balfour. The flush—the elation, you know—of course a man talks better before his sweetheart than before the House of Commons. And if you and I,

now, must speak of what you might call the—business side of your marriage—well, I suppose we need not be too technical or strict in our language. Let us be frank with each other, and friendly. I am glad you are going to marry my daughter, and so doubtless are you.”

The young man said nothing at all. He was smoking his pipe. There was no longer any fire of indignation or earnestness in his eyes.

“ You know I am a very poor man,” his lordship continued. “ I can’t give Sylvia anything.”

“ I don’t expect it,” said Balfour.

“ On the other hand, you are a rich man. In such cases, you know, there is ordinarily a marriage-settlement, and naturally, as Sylvia’s guardian, I should expect you to give her out of your abundance. But then, Balfour,” said his lordship with a gay and a ferocious smile, “ I was thinking—merely as a joke, you know—what a rich young fellow like yourself might do to produce an impression on a romantic girl. Marriage-settlements are very prosaic things ; they look rather like buying a wife ; moreover,

they have to mention contingencies which it is awkward for an unmarried girl to hear of. Wouldn't a girl be better pleased, now, if an envelope were placed on her table the night before her marriage—the envelope containing a bank-note—say for £50,000? The mystery, the surprise, the delight—all these things would tell upon a girl's mind; and she would be glad she would not have to go to church an absolute beggar. Of course, that is merely a joke; but can't you imagine what the girl's face would be like when she opened the envelope?"

Balfour did not at all respond to his companion's gaiety. In the drawing-room below, he had betrayed an unusual enthusiasm of speech. What man in his circumstances could fail to show a natural elation? But if Lord Willowby had calculated on this elation interfering with Mr. Balfour's very sober habit of looking at business matters, he had made a decided mistake.

Balfour laid down his pipe, and put his outstretched hands on his knees.

"I don't know," said he coolly, "whether

you mean to suggest that I should do something of the sort you describe——”

“ My dear fellow ! ” said Lord Willowby, with an air of protest. “ It was only a fancy—a joke.”

“ Ah I thought so,” said Balfour. “ I think it is better to treat money-matters simply as money-matters ; romance has plenty of other things to deal with. And as regards a marriage-settlement, of course I should let my lawyer arrange the whole affair.”

“ Oh, naturally, naturally,” said his lordship, gaily ; but he inwardly invoked a curse on the head of this mean-spirited Scotchman.

“ You mentioned £50,000,” continued the younger man, speaking slowly and apparently with some indifference. “ It is a big sum to demand all at once from my partners. But then the fact is, I have never spent much money myself, and I have allowed them to absorb in the business a good deal of what I might otherwise have had ; so that they are pretty deep in my debt. You see, I have inherited from my father a good deal of pride in our firm, though

I don't know anything about its operations myself; and they have lately been extending the business both in Australia and China, and I have drawn only what I wanted for my yearly accounts. So I can easily have £50,000 from them. That in a safe 4 per cent. investment would bring £2000 a year. Do you think Lady Sylvia would consider——”

“Sylvia is a mere child,” her father said.
“She knows nothing about such things.”

“If you preferred it,” said Balfour generously,
“I will make it part of the settlement that the trustees shall invest that sum, subject to Lady Sylvia's directions.”

Lord Willowby's face, that had been gradually resuming its sombre look, brightened up.

“I suppose you would act as one of the trustees?” said Balfour.

His lordship's face grew brighter still. It was quite eagerly that he cried out——

“Oh, willingly, willingly. Sylvia would have every confidence in me naturally, and I should be delighted to be able to look after the

interests of my child. You cannot tell what she has been to me. I have tended her every day of her life——”

[“Except when you went knocking about all over Europe without her,” thought Balfour.]

“——I have devoted all my care to her——”

[“——Except what you gave to the Seven Per Cent. Investment Company,” thought Balfour.]

“——She would implicitly trust her affairs in my hands——”

[“——And prove herself a bigger fool than I take her to be,” thought this mean-spirited Scotchman.]

Lord Willowby, indeed, seemed to wake up again. Two thousand pounds a-year was ample pin-money. He had no sympathy with the extravagant habits of some women. And as Sylvia’s natural guardian, it would be his business to advise her as to the proper investment.

“My dear lord,” cried Balfour, quite cheerfully, “there won’t be the slightest trouble

about that. For, of course I shall be the other trustee."

The light on Lord Willowby's worn and sunken face suddenly vanished. But he remained very polite to his future son-in-law, and he even lit another cigarette to keep him company.

CHAPTER VIII.

MISLEADING LIGHTS.

THE two or three days Balfour now spent at Willowby Hall formed a beautiful, idle, idyllic period, not soon to be forgotten either by him or by the tender-natured girl to whom he had just become engaged. Lord Willowby left them pretty much to themselves. They rode over the great dark heath, startling the rabbits; or drove along the wooded lanes, under shelter of the elms and limes; or walked through the long grass and buttercups of the park; or, in the evening, paced up and down that stone terrace, waiting for the first notes of the nightingale. It was a time for glad and wistful dreams, for tender self-confessions, and—what is more to the purpose—for the formation of perfectly ridiculous estimates of each other's character, tastes,



and habits. This man, for example, who was naturally somewhat severe and exacting in his judgments, who was implacable in his contempt for meanness, hypocrisy, and pretence, and who was just a trifle too bitter and plain-spoken in expressing that contempt, had now grown wonderfully considerate to all human frailties, gentle in judgment, and good-natured in speech. He did not at all consider it necessary to tell her what he thought of her father. His fierce virtue did not prevent his promising to dine with her uncle. And he did not fancy that he himself was guilty of any gross hypocrisy in pretending to be immensely interested in the feeding of pigeons, the weeding of flower-beds, the records of local cricket-matches, and the forthcoming visit of the Bishop.

During those pleasant days they had talked, as lovers will, of the necessity of absolute confidence between sweetheart and sweetheart, between husband and wife. To guard against the sad misunderstandings of life, they would always be explicitly frank with each other, whatever happened. But then, if you had reproached

Balfour with concealing from his betrothed his opinion of certain of her relations, he would probably have demanded in his turn what absolute confidence was? Would life be tolerable if everything were to be spoken? A man comes home in the evening: he has lost his lawsuit—things have been bad in the City—perhaps he has been walking all day in a pair of tight boots: anyhow, he is tired, irritable, impatient. His wife meets him, and, before letting him sit down for a moment, will hurry him off to the nursery to show him the wonderful drawings Adolphus has drawn on the wall. If he is absolutely frank he will exclaim, “Oh, get away! You and your children are a thorough nuisance!” That would be frankness: absolute confidence could go no further. But the husband is not such a fool—he is not so selfishly cruel—as to say anything of the kind. He goes off to get another pair of shoes; he sits down to dinner—perhaps a trifle silent; but by-and-by he recovers his equanimity, he begins to look at the brighter side of things, and is presently heard to declare that he is quite sure that boy has something of

the artist in him, and that it is no wonder his mother takes such a pride in him, for he is the most intelligent child——&c.

Moreover, it was natural in the circumstances for Balfour to be unusually gentle and conciliatory. He was proud and pleased; it would have been strange if this new sense of happiness had not made him a little generous in his judgments of others. He was not consciously acting a part; but then every young man must necessarily wish to make himself something of a hero in the eyes of his betrothed. Nor was she consciously acting a part when she impressed on him the conviction that all her aspirations and ambitions were connected with public life. Each was trying to please the other; and each was apt to see in the other what he and she desired to see there. To put the case in as short a form as may be: here was a girl whose whole nature was steeped in Tennyson, and here was a young man who had a profound belief in Thackeray. But when, under the shadow of the great elms, in the stillness of these summer days, he read to her passages from '*Maud*', he declared that existence

had nothing further to give than that; while she, for her part, was eager to have him tell her of the squabbles and intrigues of Parliamentary life, and expressed her settled conviction that 'Vanity Fair' was the cleverest book in the whole world.

On the morning of the day on which he was to leave, he brought down to the breakfast-room a newspaper. He laughed as he handed it to her.

This was a copy of the *Ballinascroon Sentinel*, which contained not only an account of the interview between Mr. Balfour, M.P., and a deputation from his constituents, but also a leading article on that event. The *Ballinascroon Sentinel* waxed eloquent over the matter. The Member for Ballinascroon was "a renegade Scotchman, whose countrymen were ashamed to send him to Parliament, and who had had the audacity to accept the representation of an Irish borough, which had been grossly betrayed and insulted as the reward for its mistaken generosity." There was a good deal more of the same sort of thing; it had not much novelty for Mr. Balfour.



But it was new to Lady Sylvia. It was with flashing eyes and a crimsoned cheek that she rose, and carried the newspaper to her father, who was standing at the window. Lord Willowby merely looked down the column, and smiled.

“Balfour is accustomed to it,” said he.

“But is it fair—is it sufferable,” she said, with that hot indignation still in her face, “that any one should have to grow accustomed to such treatment? Is this the reward in store for a man who spends his life in the public service? The writer of that shameful attack ought to be prosecuted; he ought to be fined and imprisoned; if I were a man, I would horsewhip him, and I am sure he would run away fast enough!”

“Oh, no! Lady Sylvia,” said Balfour, though his heart warmed to the girl for that generous espousal of his cause. “You must remember that he is smarting under the wrongs of Ireland, or rather the wrongs of Ballinascroon. I dare say, if I were a leading man in a borough, I should not like to have the member representing the borough simply making a fool of it. I can

see the joke of the situation, although I am a Scotchman; but you can't expect the people in the borough to see it. And if my friend the editor uses warm language, you see that is how he earns his bread. I have no doubt he is a very good sort of fellow. I have no doubt, when they kick me out of Ballinascroon, and if I can get in for some other place, I shall meet him down at Westminster, and he will have no hesitation at all in asking me to help to get his son the Governorship of Timbuctoo, or some such post."

Was not this generous, she said to herself? He might have exacted damages from this poor man. Perhaps he might have had him imprisoned, and sent to the treadmill. But no. There was no malice in his nature, no anxious vanity, no sentiment of revenge. Lady Sylvia's was not the only case in which it might have been remarked that the most ordinary qualities of prudence or indifference exhibited by a young man become, in the eyes of the young man's sweetheart, proof of a forbearance, a charity, a goodness altogether heroic and sublime.

Her mother having died when she was a mere child, Lady Sylvia had known scarcely any grief more serious than the loss of a pet canary, or the withering of a favourite flower. Her father professed an elaborate phraseological love for her, and he was undoubtedly fond of his only child; but he also dearly liked his personal liberty, and he had from her earliest years accustomed her to bid him good-bye without much display of emotion on either side. But now, on this morning, a strange heaviness of heart possessed her. She looked forward to that drive to the station with a dull sense of foreboding; she thought of herself coming back alone—for her father was going up to town with Balfour—and for the first time in her life the solitude of the Hall seemed to her something she could not bear.

“Sylvia,” said her father, when they had all got into the wagonette, “you don’t look very bright this morning.”

She started—and flushed with an anxious shame. She hoped they would not think she was cast down merely because she was going to bid good-bye to Mr. Balfour for a few days.

Would they not meet on the following Wednesday at her uncle's?

So, as they drove over to the station, the girl was quite unusually gay and cheerful. She was no longer the serious Syllabus whom her cousin Johnny used to tease into petulance. Balfour was glad to see her looking so bright; doubtless the drive through the sweet, fresh air had raised her spirits.

And she was equally cheerful in the station; for she did not cease to say to herself—“*Keep up now, keep up. It is only five minutes now. And oh! if he were to see me cry—the least bit—I should die of shame.*”

“Sylvia,” said he, when they happened to be alone for a moment, “I suppose I may write to you.”

“Yes,” said she timidly.

“How often?”

“I—I don't know,” said she, looking down.

“Would it bother you if you had a letter every morning?”

“Oh,” she said, “you could never spare time to write to me so often as that. I know how

busy you must be. You must not let me interfere in any way, now or at any time, with your real work. You must promise that to me."

"I will promise this to you," said he, taking her hand to bid her good-bye, "that my relations with you shall never interfere with my duties towards the honourable and independent electors of Ballinascroon. Will that do?"

The train came up. She dared not raise her eyes to his face as she shook hands with him. Her heart was beating hurriedly.

She conquered, nevertheless. There were several people about the station who knew Lord Willowby's daughter; and as she was rather a distinguished person in that neighbourhood, and as she was pretty and prettily dressed, she attracted a great deal of notice. But what did they see? Only Lady Sylvia bidding good-bye to her papa, and to a gentleman who had doubtless been his guest; and there was nothing but a bright and friendly smile in her face as she looked after that particular carriage in the receding train.

But there was no smile at all in her face as she was being driven back through the still and wooded country to the empty Hall. The large, tender, dark-grey eyes were full of trouble and anxious memories ; her heart was heavy within her. It was her first sorrow ; and there was something new, alarming, awful about it. This sense of loneliness—of being left—of having her heart yearning after something that had gone away—was a new experience altogether, and it brought with it strange tremors of unrest and unreasoning anxiety.

She had often read in books that the best cure for care was hard work ; and as soon as she got back to the Hall she set busily about the fulfilment of her daily duties. She found, however, but little relief. The calm of mind and of occupation had fled from her. She was agitated by all manner of thoughts, fancies, surmises, that would not let her be in peace.

That letter of the next morning, for example ; she would have to answer it. But how ? She went to her own little sitting-room, and securely locked the door, and sate down to her desk.

She stared at the blank paper for several minutes before she dared to place anything on it; and it was with a trembling hand that she traced out the words, "*Dear Mr. Balfour.*" Then she pondered for a long time on what she should say to him—a difficult matter to decide, seeing she had not as yet received the letter which she wished to answer. She wrote, "*My dear Mr. Balfour;*" and looked at that. Then she wrote, with her hand trembling more than ever, "*Dear H—,*" but she got no further than that, for some flush of colour mounted to her face, and she suddenly resolved to go and see the head gardener about the new geraniums. Before leaving the room, however, she tore up the sheet of paper into very small pieces.

Now the head-gardener was a soured and disappointed man. The whole place, he considered, was starved; such flowers as he had nobody came to see; while Lord Willowby had an amazingly accurate notion of the amount which the sale of the fruit of each year ought to bring. He was curt of speech, and resented interference. On this occasion, moreover, he was in an ill-

humour. But to his intense surprise his young mistress was not to be beaten off by short answers. Was her ladyship in an ill-humour too? Anyhow, she very quickly brought him to his senses; and one good issue of that day's worry was that old Blake was a great deal more civil to Lady Sylvia ever after.

"You know, Blake," said she, firmly, "you Yorkshire people are said to be a little too sharp with your tongue sometimes."

"I do not know, my lady," said the old man with great exasperation, "why the people will go on saying I am from Yorkshire. If I have lived in a stable I am not a hoarse. I am sure I have telled your ladyship I was boarn in Dumfries."

"Indeed you have, Blake," said Lady Sylvia, with a singular change of manner. "Really I had quite forgotten. I think you said you left Scotland when you were a lad; but of course you claim to be Scotch. That is quite right."

She had become very friendly. She sate down on some wooden steps beside him, and regarded his work with quite a new interest.

"It is a fine country, is it not?" said she, in a conciliatory tone.

"We had better crops where I was born than ye get about the sandy wastes here," said the old man, gruffly.

"I did not mean that quite," said Lady Sylvia, patiently, "I meant that the country generally was a noble country—its magnificent mountains and valleys, its beautiful lakes and islands, you know."

Blake shrugged his shoulders. Scenery was for fine ladies to talk about.

"Then the character of the people," said Lady Sylvia, nothing daunted, "has always been so noble and independent. Look how they have fought for their liberties civil and religious. Look at their enterprise—they are to be found all over the globe—the first pioneers of civilization——"

"Ay, and it isn't much that some of them make by it," said Blake, sulkily; for this pioneer certainly considered that he had been hardly used in these alien and unenlightened regions.

"I don't wonder, Blake," said Lady Sylvia,

in a kindly way, "that you should be proud of being a Scotchman. Of course, you know all about the Covenanters."

"Ay, your ladyship," said Blake, still going on with his work.

"I dare say you know," said Lady Sylvia, more timidly, "that one of the most unflinching of them—one of the grandest figures in that fight for freedom of worship—was called Balfour."

She blushed as she pronounced the name; but Blake was busy with his plants.

"Ay, your ladyship. I wonder whether that man is ever going to send the wire-netting."

"I will take care you shall have it at once," said Lady Sylvia, as she rose and went to the door. "If we don't have it by to-morrow night, I will send to London for it. Good morning, Blake."

Blake grunted out something in reply, and was glad to be left to his own meditations. But even this shrewd semi-Scotchman semi-Yorkshireman could not make out why his mistress, after showing a bit of a temper, and undoubt-

edly getting the better of him, should so suddenly have become friendly and conciliatory. And what could her ladyship mean by coming and talking to her gardener about the Covenanters?

That first day of absence was a lonely and miserable day for Lady Sylvia. She spent the best part of the afternoon in her father's library, hunting out the lives of great statesmen, and anxiously trying to discover particulars about the wives of those distinguished men—how they qualified themselves for the fulfilment of their serious duties, how they best forwarded their husbands' interests, and so forth, and so forth. But somehow, in the evening, other fancies beset her. The time that Balfour had spent at Willowby Hall had been very pleasant for her; and as her real nature asserted itself, she began to wish that that time could have lasted for ever. That would have been a more delightful prospect for her than the anxieties of a public life. Nay, more; as this feeling deepened she began to look on the conditions of public life as so many rivals that had already

inflicted on her this first miserable day of existence by robbing her of her lover. She began to lose her enthusiasm about grateful constituencies, triumphant majorities carrying great measures through every stage, the national thanksgiving awarded to the wearied statesman. It may seem absurd to say that a girl of eighteen should begin to harbour a feeling of bitter jealousy against the British House of Commons, but stranger things than that have happened in the history of the human heart.

CHAPTER IX.

LOVE'S SORROWS.

"SUSAN," said Master Johnny Blythe, to his sister—her name was Honoria, and therefore he called her Susan—"you have got yourself up uncommon smart to-night. I see how it is. You girls are all alike. As soon as one of you catches a fellow, you won't let him alone; you're all for pulling him off; you're like a lot of sparrows with one bit of bread amongst you."

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Miss Honoria with proud indifference.

"Oh, yes, you do," retorted Johnny, regarding himself in a mirror, and adjusting his white tie. "You don't catch a man like Balfour stopping down at Willowby three whole days in the middle of the session, and all for nothing. Then it was from Willowby he telegraphed he

would come here to-night, after he had refused. Well, I wonder at poor old Syllabus ; I thought she was a cut above a tea-and-coffee fellow. I suppose it's his £30,000 a-year ; at least, it would be in your case, Susan. Oh, I know. I know when you part your hair at the side you mean mischief. And so we shall have a battle-royal to-night—Susan *v.* Syllabus—and all about a grocer ! ”

Those brothers ! The young lady whom Master Johnny treated with so much familiarity and disrespect was of an appearance to drive the fancies of a young man mad. She was tall, and slender, and stately ; though she was scarcely eighteen there was something almost mature and womanly in her presence ; she had large dark eyes, heavy-lidded ; big masses of black hair tightly braided up behind to show her shapely neck ; a face such as Gainsborough might have painted, young, and fresh, and pink ; a chin somewhat too full, but round with the soft contour of girlhood. She was certainly very unlike her cousin, both in appearance and expression. Lady Sylvia's eyes were pensive

and serious ; this young woman's were full of practical life and audacity. Lady Sylvia's under lip retreated somewhat, and gave a sweet, shy, sensitive look to the fine face ; whereas Honoria Blythe's under lip was full and round and ripe as a cherry, and was in fit accordance with her frank and bold black eye.

Mrs. Blythe came into the drawing-room. She was a large and portly person, pale, with painted eyelashes, and unnaturally yellow hair. Lord Willowby had no great liking for his sister-in-law ; he would not allow Sylvia to go on a visit to her ; when he and his daughter came to town, as on the present occasion, they stopped at a private hotel in Arlington Street. Finally, the head of the house made his appearance. Major Blythe had all the physique that his elder brother, Lord Willowby, lacked. He was stout and roseate of face, bald for the most part, his eyes a trifle bloodshot, and his hand inclined to be unsteady, except when he was playing pool. He wore diamond studs ; he said "by Gad" ; and he was hotly convinced that Arthur Orton, who was then being tried, was not Arthur Orton

at all, but Roger Tichborne. So much for the younger branch of the Blythe family.

As for the elder branch, Lord Willowby was at that moment seated in an easy-chair in a room in Arlington Street, reading the evening paper ; while his daughter was in her own room, anxious as she never had been anxious before about her toilette and the services of the faithful Anne. Lady Sylvia had spent a miserable week. A week ?—it seemed a thousand years rather ; and as that portentous period had to be got through somehow, she had mostly devoted it to reading and re-reading six letters she had received from London, until every phrase and every word of these precious and secret documents was engraven on her memory. She had begun to reason with herself, too, about her hatred of the House of Commons. She tried hard to love that noble institution ; she was quite sure, if only her father would take her over to Ballinascroon, she would go into every house, and shake hands with the people, and persuade them to let Mr. Balfour remain their representative when the next General Election came

round ; and she wondered, moreover, whether, when her lover went away on that perilous mission of his through the slums of Westminster, she could not, too, as well as he, put on some mean attire, and share with him the serious dangers and discomforts of that wild enterprise.

And now she was about to meet him ; and a great dread possessed her lest her relatives should discover her secret. Again and again she pictured to herself the forthcoming interview ; and her only safety seemed to be in preserving a cold demeanour and a perfect silence, so that she should escape the shame of being suspected.

The Blythes lived in a small and rather poorly furnished house in Dean Street, Park Lane ; Lord Willowby and his daughter had not far to drive. When they went into the drawing-room, Lady Sylvia dared scarcely look around ; it was only as she was being effusively welcomed by her aunt that she became vaguely aware that Mr. Balfour was not there. Strange as it may appear, his absence seemed to her a quick and glad relief. She was anxious, perturbed, eager to escape from a scrutiny on the part of her

relatives, which she more than half expected. But when she had shaken hands with them all, and when the two or three strangers present began to talk those staccato commonplaces which break the frigid silence before dinner, she was in a measure left to herself; and it was then that—not heeding in the least the chatter of Master Johnny—she began to fear. Had he already adventured on that Haroun al Raschid enterprise, and been stopped by a gang of thieves? There was a great outcry at this time about railway accidents; was it possible that —? Or was he merely detained at the House of Commons? She forgot that the House does not sit on Wednesday evenings.

She was standing near the entrance to the room, apparently listening to Master Johnny, when she heard a knock at the door below. Then she heard footsteps on the narrow staircase, which made her heart beat. Then a servant announced Mr. Balfour. Her eyes were downcast.

Now Balfour, as he came in, ought to have passed her as if she had been a perfect stranger,

and gone on and addressed himself, first of all, to his hostess. But he did nothing of the kind.

"How do you do, Lady Sylvia?" said he, and he stopped and shook hands with her.

She never saw him at all. Her eyes were fixed on the floor; and she did not raise them. But she placed her trembling hand in his for a moment, and murmured something, and then experienced an infinite relief when he went on towards Mrs. Blythe.

She was glad, too, when she saw that he was to take his hostess in to dinner. Had they heard of this secret, might they not, as a sort of blundering compliment, have asked him to take her in? As it was, she fell to the lot of a German gentleman, who knew very little English, and was anxious to practise what little he knew, but who very soon gave up the attempt on finding his companion about the most silent and reserved person whom he had ever sate next at dinner. He was puzzled, indeed. She was an earl's daughter, and presumably had seen something of society. She had a pale, interesting, beautiful face, and thoughtful eyes; she must

have received enough attention in her time. Was she too proud, then, he thought, to bother with his broken phrases ?

The fact was, that throughout that dinner the girl had eyes and ears but for one small group of people—her cousin and Balfour, who were sitting at the further corner of the table, apparently much interested in each other. If Lady Sylvia was silent, the charge could not be brought against Honoria Blythe. That young lady was as glib a chatteringer as her brother ; she knew everything that was going on ; with the bright audacity of seventeen she gossipped and laughed, and addressed merry or deprecating glances to her companion, who sate and allowed himself to be amused with much good-humoured coolness. What were poor Sylvia's serious efforts to attain some knowledge of public affairs compared with this fluent familiarity which touched upon everything at home and abroad ? Sylvia had tried to get at the rights and wrongs of a question then being talked about—the propriety of allowing laymen to preach in Church of England pulpits : now she heard her cousin

treat the whole affair as a joke. There was nothing that that young lady did not know something about; and she chatted on with an artless vivacity, sometimes making fun, sometimes gravely appealing to him for information. Had he heard of the old lady who became insane in the Horticultural Gardens yesterday? Of course, he was going to Christie's to-morrow; they expected that big landscape would fetch twelve hundred guineas. What a shame it was for Limerick to treat Lord and Lady Spencer so! She positively adored Mr. Plimsoll. What *would* people say if the Shah did really bring three of his wives to England, and would they all go about with him?

Poor Sylvia listened, and grew sick at heart. Was not this the sort of girl to interest and amuse a man; to cheer him when he was fatigued; to enter into all his projects and understand him? Was she not strikingly handsome, too, this tall girl with the heavy-lidded eyes, and the cherry mouth, and the full round chin curving in to the shapely neck? She admitted all these things to herself; but she did

not love her cousin any the more. She grew to think it shameful that a young girl should make eyes at a man like that. Was she not calling the attention of the whole table to herself and to him ? Her talking, her laughing, the appealing glances of those audacious black eyes—all these things sank deeper and deeper into the heart of one silent observer, who did not seem to be enjoying herself much.

As for Balfour, he was obviously amused, and doubtless he was pleased at the flattering attention which this fascinating young lady paid him. He had found himself seated next her by accident ; but as she was apparently so anxious to talk to him, he could not well do otherwise than neglect (as Lady Sylvia thought) Mrs. Blythe, whom he had actually taken in to dinner. And was it not clear, too, that he spoke in a lower voice than she did, as though he would limit their conversation to themselves ? When she asked him to tell them all that was thought among political folks of the Radical victories at the French elections, why should he address the answer to herself alone ? And was it not too

shameless of this girl—at least, so Lady Sylvia thought—who ought to have been at school, to go on pretending that she was greatly interested in General Dorregaray, the King of Sweden, and such persons, merely that she should show off her knowledge to an absolute stranger?

Lady Sylvia sate there, with a sense of wrong and humiliation burning into her heart. Not once, during the whole of that dinner, did he address a single word to her; not once did he even look towards her. All his attention was monopolised by that bold girl who sate beside him. And this was the man who, but a few days before, had been pretending that he cared for nothing in the world so much as a walk through Willowby Park with the mistress thereof, who had then no thought for anything but herself, no words or looks for any one but her.

Lady Sylvia was seated near the door, and when the ladies left the room, she was one of the first to go. You would not have imagined that underneath that sweet and graciou scarriage, which charmed all beholders except one ungrateful young man, there was burning a fierce fire of

wrong, and shame, and indignation. She walked into the drawing-room, and went into a further corner ; and took a book—on the open page of which she did not see a single word.

The men came in. Balfour went over, and took a seat beside her.

“ Well, Sylvia,” said he, lightly, “ I suppose you won’t stay here long. I am anxious to introduce you to Lady — ; and there is to be a whole batch of Indian or Afghan princes there to-night—their costumes make such a difference in a room. When do you think you will go ? ”

She hesitated ; her heart was full ; had they been alone, she would probably have burst into tears. As it was, he never got any answer to his question. A tall young lady came sweeping by at the moment.

“ Mr. Balfour,” she said, with a sweet smile, “ will you open the piano for me ? ”

And again Lady Sylvia sate alone, and watched these two. He stood by the side of the piano as the long tapering fingers—Honoria had beautifully-formed hands, every one admitted—began to wander over the keys ; and the

dreamy music that began to fill the silence of the room seemed to lend something of imagination and pathos to a face that otherwise had little in it beyond merely physical beauty. She played well, too ; with perfect self-possession ; her touch was light, and on these dreamy passages there was a rippling as of falling water in some enchanted cave. Then down went both hands with a crash on the keys ; all the air seemed full of cannonading and musketry fire ; her finely-formed bust seemed to have the delight of physical exercise in it as those tightly-sleeved and shapely arms banged this way and that ; those beautiful lips were parted somewhat with her breathing. Lady Sylvia did not think much of her cousin's playing. It was coarse, theatrical, all for display. But she had to confess to herself that Honoria was a beautiful girl, who promised to become a beautiful woman ; and what wonder, therefore, if men were glad to regard her, now as she sate upright there, with the fire and passion of her playing lending something of heroism and inspiration to her face ?

That men should : yes, that was right enough : but that this one man should—that was the bitter thing. Surely he had not forgotten that it was but one week since she had assigned over to him the keeping of her whole life ; and was this the fashion in which he was showing his gratitude ? She had looked forward to this one evening with many happy fancies. She would see him ; one look would confirm the secret between them. All the torturing anxieties of absence would be banished so soon as she could reassure herself by hearing his voice, by feeling the pressure of his hand. She had thought and dreamt of this evening in the still woodland ways, until her heart beat rapidly with a sense of her coming happiness ; and now this disappointment was too bitter. She could not bear it.

She went over to her father.

“ Papa,” she said, “ I wish to go. Don’t let me take you ; I can get to the hotel by myself——”

“ My dear child ! ” said he, with a stare, “ I thought you particularly wanted to go to —

House, after what Balfour told you about the staircase and the flowers——”

“ I—I have a headache,” said the girl. “ I am tired. Please let me go by myself, papa.”

“ Not at all, child,” said he. “ I will go whenever you like.”

Then she besought him not to draw attention to their going. She would privately bid good-night to Mrs. Blythe; to no one else. If he came out a couple of seconds after she left the room he would find her waiting.

“ You must say good-bye to Balfour,” said Lord Willowby; “ he will be dreadfully disappointed.”

“ I don’t think it is necessary,” said Lady Sylvia, coldly. “ He is too much engaged—he won’t notice our going.”

Fortunately, their carriage had been ordered early, and they had no difficulty in getting back to the hotel. On the way, Lady Sylvia did not utter a word.

“ I will bid you good-night now, papa,” said she, as soon as they had arrived.

He paused for a moment, and looked at her.

"Sylvia," said he, with some concern, "you look really ill. What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," she said. "I am tired a little, and I have a headache. Good night, papa."

She went to her own room, but not to sleep. She declined the attentions of her maid, and locked herself in. Then she took out a small packet of letters.

Were these written by the same man? She read, and wondered, with her heart growing sorer and sorer, until a mist of tears came over her eyes, and she could see no more. And then, her grief becoming more passionate, she threw herself on the bed, and burst into a wild fit of crying and sobbing, the letters being clutched in her hand, as if they, at least, were one possession that could not be taken away from her. That was a bitter night—never to be forgotten; and when the next day came, she went down—with a pale and tired face, and with dark rings under the beautiful, sad eyes—and demanded of her father that she should be allowed at once to return to Willowby Hall, her maid alone accompanying her.



CHAPTER X.

REPENTANCE.

BALFOUR was astounded when he learned that Lord Willowby and his daughter had left without bidding him good-bye; and he was more astounded still when he found, on calling at their hotel next morning, that Lady Sylvia had gone home.

“What is the meaning of it?” said he, in amazement.

“You ought to know,” said Lord Willowby. “I cannot tell you. I supposed she and you had had some quarrel.”

“A quarrel!” he cried—beginning to wonder whether his reason had not altogether forsaken him.

“Well,” said his lordship, with a shrug, “I don’t know. She would come home last night,

though I knew she had been looking forward to going to Lady ——'s. And this morning, nothing would do but that she must get home at once. She and Anne started an hour ago."

"Oh, this is monstrous—this is unendurable," said Balfour. "There is some mistake—and it must be cleared up at once. Come, Lord Willowby, shall we take a run down into Surrey? You will be back by four or five."

Lord Willowby did not like the notion of being dragged down into Surrey and back by an impatient lover; but he was very anxious at this time to ingratiate himself with Balfour. And when they did set out, he thought he might as well improve the occasion. Balfour was disturbed and anxious by this strange conduct on the part of his sweetheart; and he was grateful to Lord Willowby for so promptly giving him his aid to have the mystery cleared up. He was talking more than usual. What wonder, then, that in the course of conversation Lord Willowby should incidentally allude to the opportunities which a man of means had of multiplying his wealth? If he had a few thousands,

for example, how could he better dispose of them than in this project for the buying of land in the suburbs of New York? It was not a speculation; it was a certainty. In 1880 the population of New York would be two millions. The value of this land for the building of handsome boulevards would be enormously increased. And so forth.

"I heard you were in that," said Balfour, curtly.

"Well, what do you think of it?" said Lord Willowby, with some eagerness.

"I don't know," answered the younger man, absently looking out of the window. "I don't think there is any certainty about it. I fancy the Americans have been over-spending and over-building for some time back. If that land *were* thrown on your hands—and you had to go on paying the heavy assessments they levy out there—it would be an uncommonly awkward thing for you."

"You take rather a gloomy view of things this morning," said Lord Willowby, with one of his fierce and suddenly vanishing smiles.

“At any rate,” said Balfour, with some firmness, “it is a legitimate transaction. If the people want the land, they will have to pay your price for it: that is a fair piece of business. I wish I could say as much—you will forgive my frankness—about your Seven per Cent. Investment Association.”

His lordship started. There was an ugly implication in the words. But it was not the first time he had had to practise patience with this Scotch boor.

“Come, Balfour, you are not going to prophesy evil all round?”

“Oh no,” said the younger man, carelessly. “Only I know you can’t go on paying seven per cent. It is quite absurd.”

“My dear fellow, look at the foreign loans that are paying their eight, ten, twelve per cent.—”

“I suppose you mean the South American Republics!”

“Look how we distribute the risk. The failure of one particular investment might ruin the individual investor: it scarcely touches the

Association. I consider we are doing an immense service to all those people throughout the country who *will* try to get a high rate of interest for their money. Leave them to themselves, and they ruin themselves directly. We step in, and give them the strength of co-operation."

"I wish your name did not appear on the Board of Directors," said Balfour, shortly.

Lord Willowby was not a very sensitive person, but this rudeness caused his sallow face to flush somewhat. What, then: must he look to the honour of his name now that this sprig of a merchant—this tradesman—had done him the honour of proposing to marry into his family? However, Lord Willowby, if he had a temper like other people, had also a great deal of prudence and self-control, and there were many reasons why he should not quarrel with this blunt-spoken young man at present.

They had not remembered to telegraph for the carriage to meet them; so they had to take a fly at the station; and await patiently the 'slow rumbling along the sweetly-scented lanes.

As they neared the Hall, Balfour was not a little perturbed. This was a new and a strange thing to him. If the relations between himself and his recently-found sweetheart were liable to be thus suddenly and occultly cut asunder, what possible rest or peace was there in store for either? And it must be said that of all the conjectures he made as to the cause of this mischief, not one got even near the truth.

Lady Sylvia was sent for ; and her father discreetly left the young man alone in the drawing-room. A few minutes afterwards the door was opened. Balfour had been no diligent student of women's faces ; but even he could tell that the girl who now stood before him, calm, and pale, and silent, had spent a wakeful night, and that her eyes had been washed with tears ; so that his first impulse was to go forward and draw her towards him, that he might hear her confession with his arms around her. But there was something unmistakeably cold and distant in her manner that forbade his approach.

“Sylvia,” he cried, “what is all this about ? Your father fancies you and I have quarrelled.”

"No, we have not quarrelled," she said, simply—but there was a tired look in her eyes. "We have only misunderstood each other. It is not worth talking about."

He stared at her, in amazement.

"I hear papa outside," she said; "shall we join him?"

But this was not to be borne. He went forward, took her two hands firmly in his, and said with decision—

"Come, Sylvia, we are not children. I want to know why you left last night. I have done my best to guess at the reason; and I have failed."

"You don't know, then?" she said, turning the pure, clear, innocent eyes on his face with a look that had not a little indignation in it. It was well for him that he could meet that straight look without flinching.

"I give you my word of honour," said he, with obvious surprise, "that I haven't the remotest notion in the world as to what all this means."

"It is nothing, then?" said she, warmly, and

she was going to proceed with her charge when her pride rebelled. She would not speak. She would not claim that which was not freely given. Unfortunately, however, when she would fain have got away, he had a tight grip of her hand ; and it was clear from the expression on this man's face that he meant to have an explanation, there and then.

So he held her until she told him the whole story—the red blood tingling in her cheek the while, and her bosom heaving with that struggle between love and wounded pride. He waited until she had spoken the very last word ; and then he let her hands fall, and stood silent before her for a second or two.

“Sylvia,” said he, slowly, “this is not merely a lover’s quarrel. This is more serious. I could not have imagined that you knew so little about me. You fancy, then, that I am a fresh and ingenuous youth, ready to have my head turned if a school-girl looks at me from under long eyelashes ; or worse still, a philanderer—a professor of the fine art of flirtation. Well, that was

not my reading of myself. I fancied I had come to man's estate. I fancied I had some serious work to do. I fancied I knew a little about men and women—at least I never imagined that any one would suspect me of being imposed on by a girl in her first season. Amused?—certainly I was amused—I was even delighted by such a show of pretty and artless innocence. Could anything be prettier than a girl in her first season assuming the airs of a woman of the world? could anything be more interesting than that innocent chatter of hers, though I could not make out whether she had caught the trick of it from her brother, or whether she had imparted to that precocious lad some of her universal information? But now it appears I was playing the part of a guileless youth. I was dazzled by the fascination of the school-girl eyes. Gracious goodness, why wasn't my hair yellow and curly, that I might have been painted as Cupid? And what would the inhabitants of Ballinascroon say if they were told *that* was my character?"

He spoke with bitter emphasis. But this man Balfour went on the principle that serious ills needed prompt and serious remedies.

“Presented to the Town-Hall of Ballinas-croon,” he continued, with a scornful laugh, “a portrait of H. Balfour, M.P., in the character of a philanderer! The author of this flattering and original likeness—Lady Sylvia Blythe!”

The girl could stand this no longer. She burst into a wild fit of crying and sobbing, in the midst of which he put his arms round her, and hushed her head against his breast, and bade her be quiet.

“Come, Sylvia,” said he, “let us have done with this nonsense at once and for ever. If you wait until I give you real cause for jealousy—if you have no other unhappiness than that—your life will be a long and fairly comfortable one. Not speaking to you all through dinner? Did you expect me to bawl across the table, when you know very well your first desire was to conceal from those people the fact of our being engaged? Listening to no one but her? I hadn’t a chance! She chattered from one

end of the dinner to the other. But really, Sylvia, if I were you, I would fix upon some more formidable rival——”

“Please don’t scold me any more,” said she, with a fresh fit of crying.

“I am not scolding you,” he said. “I am only talking common sense to you. Now dry your eyes, and promise not to be foolish any more, and come out into the garden.”

After the rain the sunshine. They went out arm-in-arm, and she was clinging very closely to him, and there was a glad, bright, blushing happiness on her face.

Now this was the end of their first trouble, and it seemed a very small and trivial affair when it was over. The way was now clear before them. There were to be no more misunderstandings. But Mr. Hugh Balfour was a practical person, not easily led away by beautiful anticipations, and the more he pondered over the matter, in those moments of quiet reflection that followed his evenings at the House, the more he became convinced that the best guarantee against the recurrence of misunder-

ings and consequent trouble was marriage. He convinced himself that an immediate marriage, or a marriage as early as social forms would allow, was not only desirable, but necessary; and so clear was his line of argument, that he never doubted for a moment but that it would at once convince Lady Sylvia.

But his arguments did not at all convince Lady Sylvia. On the contrary, this proposal, which was to put an end to the very possibility of trouble, only landed them in a further trouble. For he, being greatly occupied at the time—the Parliamentary session having got on into June—committed the imprudence of making this suggestion in a letter. Had he been down at Willowby Hall, walking with Lady Sylvia in the still twilight, with the stars beginning to tell in the sky, and the mist beginning to gather along the margin of the lake, he might have had another answer; but now she wrote to him that in her opinion so serious a step as marriage was not to be adventured upon in a hurry, and she added, too, with

some pardonable pride, that it was not quite seemly on his part to point out how they could make their honeymoon trip coincide with the general Autumn holiday. Was their marriage to appear to be a merely trivial or accidental thing, waiting for its accomplishment until Parliament should be prorogued?

He got the letter very late one night, when he was sorely fatigued, harassed, and discontented with himself. He had lost his temper in the House that evening; he had been called to order by Mr. Speaker; as he walked home he was reviling himself for having been betrayed into a rage. When he saw the letter lying on the table, he brightened up somewhat. Here, at least, would be consolation—a tender message—perhaps some gentle intimation given that the greatest wish of his heart might soon be realized. Well, he opened the letter and read it. The disappointment he experienced doubtless exaggerated what he took to be the coldness of its terms. He paid no attention to the real and honest expressions of affection in it; he looked only at her refusal, and saw

temper where there was only a natural and sensitive pride.

Then the devil took possession of him, and prompted him to write in reply there and then. Of course *he* would not show temper, being a man. All the same, he felt called on to point out, politely but firmly, that marriage was after all only one among the many facts of life ; and that it was not rendered any the more sublime and mysterious by making it the occasion for a number of microscopic martyrdoms and petty sacrifices. He saw no reason why the opportunity offered by the close of the session should not be made use of ; as for the opinion of other people on the seemliness of the arrangement, she would have to be prepared for the discovery that neither on that point nor on any other was he likely to shape his conduct to meet the views of a mass of strangers. And so forth. It was a perfectly sensible letter. The line of argument was clear. How could she fail to see her error ?

But to the poor fluttering heart down there in the country these words came with a strange

chill ; and it seemed to her that her lover had suddenly withdrawn from her to a great distance, leaving the world around her dark enough. Her first impulse was to utter a piteous cry to him. She sate down and wrote, with trembling fingers, these words :—

“ Dearest Hugh,

“ *I will do whatever you please, rather than have you write to me like that.*”

Probably, too, had she sent off this letter at once, he would have been struck by her simple and generous self-abnegation ; and he would have instantly refused to demand from her any sacrifice of feeling whatsoever. But then the devil was abroad. He generally is about when two sweethearts try to arrange some misunderstanding by the perilous process of correspondence. Lady Sylvia began to recollect that, after all, something was due to her womanly pride. Would it not seem unmaidenly thus to surrender at discretion on so all-important a point as the fixing of the wedding day ? She would not have it said that they were waiting

for Parliament to rise before they got married. In any case, she thought the time was far too short. Moreover, was this the tone in which a man should ask a woman to fix the day of her marriage?

So she answered the letter in another vein. If marriage, she said, was only one of the ordinary facts of life, she at least did not regard it in that light at all. She cared for tittle-tattle as little as he ; but she did not like the appearance of having her wedding trip arranged as if it were an excursion to Scotland for grouse-shooting. And so forth. Her letter, too, was clever—very clever, indeed, and sharp. Her face was a little flushed as she sealed it, and bade the servant take it to the post-office the first thing in the morning. But apparently that brilliant piece of composition did not afford her much satisfaction afterwards ; for she passed the night, not in healthful sleep, but in alternate fits of crying and bitter thinking, until it seemed to her that this new relationship into which she had entered with such glad anticipations was bringing her only sorrow after sorrow, grief

after grief. For she had experienced no more serious troubles than these.

When Hugh Balfour received this letter, he was in his bed-room, about eight o'clock in the evening; and he was dressed for the most part in shabby corduroy, with a wisp of dirty black silk round his neck. His man Jackson had brought up from the kitchen some ashes for the smearing of his hands and face. A cadger's basket stood on the table hard by.

CHAPTER XI.

DE PROFUNDIS.

A MORE ruffianly-looking vagabond than the honourable member for Ballinascroon could not have been found within the area of London on that warm June evening. And yet he seemed fairly pleased with himself as he boldly took his way across the Green Park. He balanced his basket jauntily over the dirty sealskin cap. He whistled as he went.

It was his third excursion of the sort ; and he was getting to be quite familiar with his *rôle*. In fact, he was not thinking at all at this moment of tramps' patter, or Covent Garden, or anything connected with the lodging-house in which he had already spent two nights. He whistled to give himself courage in another direction. Surely it was not for him, as a man of

the world, occupied with the serious duties of life, and, above all, hard-headed and practical, to be perturbed by the sentimental phantasy of a girl. Was it not for her interest, as well as his own, that he should firmly hold out? A frank exposition of their relations now would prevent mistakes in the future—would, indeed, be the truest kindness to her. And as he could not undertake to play a Cupid's part, to become a philanderer, to place a mysterious value on moods and feelings which did not correspond with the actual facts of life, was it not wiser that he should plainly declare as much?

And yet this scoundrelly-looking hawker derived but little consolation from his gay whistling. He could not but think of Lady Sylvia as she wrote the letter now in his pocket; and in his inmost consciousness he knew what that tender-hearted girl must have suffered in penning the cold, proud lines. She had none of his pressing work in which to escape from the harassing pain of such a discussion. He guessed that weary days and sleepless nights were the result of such letters as that he now carried with

him. But then, she was in the wrong. Discipline was wholesome. So he continued his contented trudge, and his whistling.

He crossed St. James's Park, passed through Queen Anne's Gate, and finally plunged into a labyrinth of narrow and squalid streets and lanes with which he seemed sufficiently familiar. It was not a pleasant quarter on this warm night ; the air was close and foul ; many of the inhabitants of the houses—loosely-dressed women for the most part, who had retreating foreheads, heavy jowls, and a loud laugh that seemed scarcely human—had come out to sit on the doorstep or the pavement. There were not many men about. A few hulking youths—bullet-headed, round-shouldered, in-kneed—lounged about the doors of the public-houses, addressing each other in the most hideous language *à propos* of nothing.

The proprietor of the common lodging-house stood at the entry in his shirt-sleeves. He took no notice of Balfour except that, on his approach, he went along the passage and unlocked a door, admitted him, and shut the door again : this

door could not be re-opened on the other side, so that there was no chance of a defaulter sneaking off in the night without paying his four-pence. Balfour went up-stairs. The doors of the various rooms and the rickety little windows were all wide open. The beds—of coarse materials, certainly, but clean—were all formally made. There was not a human being in the place.

He had a room to himself—about eight feet square, with two beds in it. He placed his basket on the bed ; and then went downstairs again, and out into the back-yard. The only occupant of the yard was a grizzled and feeble old man, who was at this moment performing his ablutions in the lavatory, which consisted of three pails of dirty water, standing on a bench in an open shed. The man dried his face, turned, and looked at Balfour with a pair of keen and ferrety eyes, said nothing, and walked off into the kitchen. Balfour was left in sole occupation of the yard, with its surroundings of tumbledown outhouses and dilapidated brick walls ; he lit a pipe, and sate down on a bench.

It was not a good time of the year for these researches, the precise object of which he had formerly explained to Lady Sylvia. The summer weather draws tramps, hawkers, and other branches of our nomadic population, into the country, where they can cadge a bit for food, and where, instead of having to pay for a bed in a hot room, they can sleep comfortably enough beneath an empty cart, or by a hedge-row, or in a new drain-pipe. Nevertheless, a good many strange people turned into this lodging-house of a night; and Balfour, on his first appearance, had rather ingratiated himself with them by pretending to have had a drop too much, and insisting on standing beer all round. As he muttered his determination to fight any man who refused to drink with him—and as there was a brawny and bony look about the build of his shoulders—the various persons present overcame their natural modesty, and drank the beer. Thereafter the newcomer relapsed into a gloomy silence; sate on a bench in a corner which was hidden in shadow; and doubtless most of his companions, as they proceeded

to talk on their experiences of unions, guardians, magistrates, and the like—the aristocracy, of course, preferring to talk of the money they had made in bygone times, when their particular trade or lay had not been overrun with competition—imagined he was asleep.

On the following night he was well received ; and now he entered a little more into conversation with them—his share in it being limited to occasional questions. But there was one man there who, from the very first, regarded him with suspicion ; and he knew that from the way in which this man followed him about with his watchful eyes. This was an old man called Fiddling Jack, who, with a green shade over his eyes, went about Lambeth as a blind man, accompanied by his daughter, a child of nine or ten, who played the violin and collected the coppers. Whether his care of the child was parental or merely prudential, he always brought her back to the lodging-house, and sent her to bed, by nine o'clock ; the rest of the evening he spent in the great kitchen, smoking a black clay pipe. From the very first Balfour knew that this old

man suspected something; or was it that his eyes, being guarded from the light all day, seemed preternaturally keen when the green shade was removed?

But the man whom Balfour most feared was another old man, who in former days had been the owner of a large haberdashery business in the King's Road, Chelsea; and who had drank himself down until he now earned his living by selling evening papers on one of the river piers. His brain, too, had given way; he was now a half-maudlin, amiable, harmless old man, whose fine language and courteous manners had got for him the title of "Mr." Now Mr. Sturt excelled in conversation, and he spoke with great propriety of phrase, so that again and again Balfour found himself on the point of replying to this old gentleman as he would have done to a member of the House of Commons. In fact, his only safeguard with respect to Mr. Sturt lay in complete silence.

But indeed, on this third evening of his explorations, his heart was not in his work at all. As he walked up and down the squalid yard—

occasionally noticing a new-comer come in—his mind was filled, not with any social or political problem, but with a great compunction and yearning. He dared not take Lady Sylvia's letter from his pocket; but he tried to remember every word in it; and he pondered over this and the other phrase to see if it could not somehow be construed into an expression of affection. Then he began to compose his answer to it; and that, he determined, would be a complete abandonment of the position he had taken up. After all, was not a great deal to be granted to the woman one loved? If she was unreasonable, it was only the privilege of her sex. In any case, he would argue no longer; he would try the effect of a frank and generous surrender.

Having come to this decision, which afforded him great internal comfort, he bethought himself of his immediate task; and accordingly he walked into the kitchen, where a number of the *habitués* had already assembled. An excess of courtesy is not the order of the day in a common lodging-house, and so he gave no greeting, and received none. He sate down on a ricketty

stool in a great, dusky den ; and while some of the odd-looking folks were having their supper, he lit another pipe. But he had not sate there five minutes when he had formed a distinct opinion that there was an alteration in the manner of those people towards him. They looked at him askance ; they had become silent since the moment of his entrance. Moreover, the new-comers, as they dropped in, regarded him curiously, and invariably withdrew to the further end of the big apartment. When they spoke, it was amongst themselves, and in a low voice.

So conscious did he in time become of all this that he resolved he would not spoil the evening of these poor folks ; he would go up to that small room above. Doubtless some secret wish to re-read Lady Sylvia's letter had some influence on this decision ; at any rate, he went out into the yard, took a turn up and down with his hands in his pockets ; and then with apparent carelessness went upstairs. He sate down on the edge of the small and rude bed, and took out the letter.

He not been there five minutes when a woman rushed into the room, greatly excited. She was a stalwart woman, with an immensely broad bust, keen grey eyes, and a grey moustache, that gave a truculent look to her face.

"For God's sake, get out o' this, sir!" she said, hurriedly, but not loudly, "the boys have been drinking at the Blue Tun, and they're coming down on you—look sharp, sir, never mind the basket—run for it——"

"But what's the matter, Mrs. Grace?" said he, stubbornly, refusing to rise; he could not submit to the ignominy of running, without knowing why.

"It's all along o' that Fiddling Jack—by the Lord, I'll pay him out!" said the woman, with an angry look. "He's been about saying you was a buz-man——"

"A what?"

"He says it was you got Billy Rowland a lifer; and the boys are saying they'll do for you this very night. Get away now, sir—it's no use talking to them — they've been drinking."

"Look here, Mrs. Grace," said he, calmly, as he removed a false bottom from the basket beside him, and took out a six-chambered revolver, "I am a peaceable person; but if there's a row, I'll play ducks and drakes with some of them."

"For God's sake, don't show them that, or you're a dead man," said the woman. "Now, sir, off you go."

He seemed in no great hurry; but he put the pistol into his breast-pocket, put on his cap, and went downstairs. There was no sound at all—no unusual excitement. He got the proprietor to unlock the dividing-door, and went along the passage. He called a good-night to Mrs. Grace.

But he had no sooner got to the street than he was met by a great howl, like the roaring of wild beasts; and then he saw before him a considerable crowd of people who had just come along, and were drawing round the entrance in a semi-circle. He certainly turned pale for a moment, and stood still. It was only in a confused sort of way that he perceived that this hoarsely-murmuring crowd was composed

chiefly of women—viragoes with bare heads and arms—and louts of lads about nineteen or twenty. He could not distinguish their cries; he only knew that they were mingled taunts and menaces. What to do he knew not; while to speak to this howling mass was on the face of it useless. What was all this about “Billy Rowland,” “Scotland Yard,” “Spy,” “Buzman,” and the rest?

“What is it you want with me?” he called aloud; but of what avail was his single voice against those thousand angry cries?

A stone was flung at him, and missed him. He saw the big lout who threw it dodge back into the crowd.

“You cowardly scoundrel,” he shouted, making an involuntary step forward, “Come out here and I’ll fight you—I’ll fight any one of you—ah! skulk behind the women, do!—”

At this moment he received a stinging blow on the side of the head that sent him staggering for a yard or two. A woman had crept up by the side of the houses, and pitched a broken piece of tile at him. Had she thrown it, it must

have killed him ; as it was, it merely cut him, so that instantaneously the side of his head and neck were streaming with blood.

He recovered his footing ; the stinging pain awoke all the Celtic ferocity in him ; he drew out his revolver, and turned to the spot from whence his unexpected assailant had attacked him. There was one terrible moment of hesitation. Had it been a man he would have shot him dead. As it was, he paused ; and then, with a white face, he threw his revolver on the pavement.

He did not quite know what happened next, for he was faint from loss of blood, and giddy. But this was what happened. The virago who had pitched the piece of tile at him, as soon as she saw the pistol lying on the pavement, uttered a screech of joy, and sprang forward to seize it. The next moment she received a crashing blow on the jaw, which sent her reeling senseless into the gutter ; and the next moment Mrs. Grace had picked up the revolver, while with her other hand she caught hold of Balfour as with the grip of a vice, and dragged him into the passage.

"Run!" she said. "The door is open! Through the yard—there is a chair at the wall—don't stop till you're at the Abbey!"

She stood at the narrow entrance, and barred the way; the great, brawny arm gripping the revolver.

"'Swelp me," she shouted—and she knew how to make herself heard—"Swelp me God, if one of you stirs a foot nearer, there'll be murder here this night. I mean it. My name's Sal Grace; and by the Lord there's six of you dead if you lift a hand against me!"

At the same moment, Balfour, though he felt giddy, bewildered, and considerably weak about the knees, had bolted down the back yard until he came to the brick wall. Here he found a ricketty cane-bottomed chair; and by its aid he managed to clamber over. Now he was in an open space of waste ground—it had just been bought by the Government for some purpose or other—and, so far as he could see, it was closely fenced all round. At length, however, he descried a hole in the paling that some children had made; and through that he managed to

squeeze himself. Presently he was making his way as fast as he could through a series of slums; but his object was less to make straight for the Abbey than to rout out the policemen on his way, and send them back to the relief of his valiant defender; and this he most luckily and successfully accomplished. He had managed, too, during his flight, to partly mop up the blood that had streamed from the wound in his head.

Then he missed his way somehow; for otherwise, a very few minutes running and walking must have taken him either to the Abbey or the Embankment; and now, as he felt faint, he staggered into a public-house.

“Well, my man, what’s the matter with you?” said the burly publican, as he saw this new-comer sink down on a bench.

“Some water—some brandy,” said Balfour, involuntarily putting his hand up to the side of his head.

“Good Lord, you’ve ’ad the worst of it, my lad,” said the publican—he was familiar with the results of a free fight. “Here, Jim, get a

pail o' water, and let this chap put his 'ead in it. Don't you let that blood get on the floor, my man."

The cool water applied to his head, and the glass of brandy, vile as it was, that he drank, pulled Balfour together. He rose, and the publican and the pot-boy were astonished to find the difference in the appearance of this coster's face, produced by the pail of water. And when, on leaving, he gave the pot-boy half-a-crown for his attention, what were they to make of it?

By some means or other, he finally managed to wander into Victoria Street ; and here, with some difficulty, he persuaded a cabman to drive him up to Piccadilly. He was secure himself, and he had little fear for the safety of Mrs. Grace. He knew the authority wielded over the neighbourhood by that stalwart Amazon ; and in any case he had sent her sufficient police aid.

He got his man to wash that ugly cut along the side of his head before sending for a surgeon to have it properly dressed.

"Will you look at your letters, sir ?"

"No, not to-night," he said, for he was feeling tired.

But on second thoughts he fancied he might as well run his eye over the envelopes. He started on finding there was one from Lady Sylvia. Had she then written immediately after the despatch of her last?

"*Dearest Hugh,*" the girl wrote. "*It will be when you please. I cannot bear quarrelling with you. Your Sylvia.*"

As he read the simple words—he was weak and feverish—his eyes became moist. This girl loved him.

CHAPTER XII.

HAVEN AT LAST.

THE cut Balfour had received was merely a flesh-wound, and not at all serious ; but of course when Lady Sylvia heard of the adventure in Westminster she knew that he must have been nearly murdered, and she would go to him at once, and her heart smote her sorely that she should have been selfishly thinking of her own plans and wishes when this noble champion of the poor was adventuring his very life for the public good. She knew better than to believe the jibing account of the whole matter that Balfour sent her. He was always misrepresenting himself—playing the part of Mephistopheles to his own Faust—anxious to escape even from the loyal worship and admiration freely tendered him by one loving heart.

But when she insisted on at once going up to London, her father demurred. At that moment he had literally not a five-pound note he could lay his hands on; and that private hotel in Arlington Street was an expensive place.

"Why not ask him to come down here for a few days?" Lord Willowby said. "Wouldn't that be more sensible? Give him two or three days' rest and fresh air to recover him."

"He wouldn't come away just now, papa," said Lady Sylvia, seriously. "He won't let anything stand between him and his public duties——"

"His public duties!" her father said, impatiently. "His public fiddlesticks! What are his public duties—to shoot out his tongue at the very people who sent him into Parliament!"

"He has no duties to *them*," she said, warmly. "They don't deserve to be represented at all. I hope at the next General Election he will go to some other constituency. And if he does," she added, with a flush coming to her cheeks, "I know one who will canvass for him."

"Go away, Sylvia," said her father, with a

smile, “and write a line to the young man, and tell him to come down here. He will be glad enough. And what is this nonsense about a house in this neighbourhood—don’t you want to see about that if you are going to get married in August? At the same time, I think you are a couple of fools.”

“Why, papa?” she demanded, patiently.

“To throw away money like that! What more could you want than that house in Piccadilly? It could be made a charming little place. And this nonsense about a cottage down here—roses and lilies, I suppose, and a cuckoo-clock and a dairy; you have no right to ask any man to throw away his money like that.”

Lord Willowby showed an unusual interest in Mr. Balfour’s affairs; perhaps it was merely because he knew how much better use he could have made of this money than the young people were going to squander.

“It is his own wish, papa.”

“Who put it into his head?”

“And if I did?” said Lady Sylvia, valiantly, “don’t you think there should be some retreat

for a man harassed with the cares of public life ? What rest could he get in Piccadilly ? Surely it is no unusual thing for people to have a house in the country as well as one in town ; and of course there is no part of the country I could like as much as this part. So you see you are quite wrong, papa ; and I am quite right—as I always am.”

“ Go away, and write your letter,” said her father.

Lady Sylvia went to her room, and sate down to her desk. But before she wrote to Balfour she had another letter to write, and she seemed to be sorely puzzled about it. She had never written to Mrs. Grace before ; and she did not know exactly how to apologise for her presumption in addressing a stranger. Then she wished to send Mrs. Grace a present ; and the only thing she could think of was lace—for lace was about the only worldly valuables which Lady Sylvia possessed. All this was of her own undertaking. Had she consulted her father, he would have said, “ Write as you would to a servant.” Had she consulted Balfour, he would

have shouted with laughter at the notion of presenting that domineering landlady of the Westminster slums with a piece of real Valenciennes. But Lady Sylvia set to work on her own account; and at length composed the following message, out of the ingenuous simplicity of her own small head:—“Willowby Hall, Tuesday morning. My dear Mrs. Grace,—I hope you will pardon the liberty I take in sending you these few lines, but I have just heard how nobly and bravely you rendered assistance, at great risk to yourself, to Mr. Balfour, who is a particular friend of my father’s and mine, and I thought you would not be offended if I wrote to say how very heartily we thank you. And will you please accept from us the accompanying little parcel; it may remind you occasionally that though we have not the pleasure of your personal acquaintance we are none the less most deeply grateful to you.—I am, my dear Mrs. Grace, yours very sincerely, Sylvia Blythe.”

Little did Balfour know of the packet which he forwarded to his valiant friend down in

Westminster ; but Happiness Alley speedily knew of it, and knows of it to this day. For at great times and seasons, when all the world has gone out to see the Queen drive to the opening of Parliament, or to look at the ruins of the last great fire, or to welcome the poor creatures set free by a gaol-delivery, and when Mrs. Grace and her friends have got back to the peace of their own homes, and when pipes have been lit and jugs of ale placed on the window-sill to cool, then with a great pride and vain-glory a certain mahogany casket is produced. And if the uses of a fichû are only to be guessed at by Mrs. Grace and her friends, and if the precise value of Valenciennes is unknown to them, what matters ? It is enough that all the world should know that this article of attire was presented to Mrs. Grace by an Earl and an Earl's daughter, in proof of which the casket contains—and this Mrs. Grace regards as the highest treasure of all—a letter written in the lady's own hand. She does not show the letter itself. She does not wish to have it fingered about and dirtied. But at

these high times of festivity, when the lace is taken out with an awful and reverent care, the envelope of the letter may at least be exhibited ; and that is stamped with an earl's coronet.

In due time Balfour went down to Willowby, and now at last it seemed as if all the troubles and sorrows of these young people were over. In the various glad preparations for the event to which they both looked forward, a generous unanimity of feeling prevailed. Each strove to outdo the other in conciliation. And Lady Sylvia's father smiled benignly on the pair, for he had just borrowed £300 from Balfour to meet some little pressing emergency.

It was a halcyon time indeed, for the year was at its fullest and sweetest, and the member for Ballinascroon was not hampered by the services he rendered to his constituents. One brilliant June day after another shone over the fair Surrey landscapes ; beech, ash, and oak were at their greenest ; the sunlight warmed up the colours of the pink chestnut and the rose-red hawthorn ; and sweet winds played about the woods. They drove to picturesque spots in

that line of hill that forms the backbone of Surrey ; they made excursions to old-fashioned little hamlets on the Thames ; together they rode over the wide commons, where the scent of the gorse was strong in the air. Balfour wondered no longer why Sylvia should love this peaceful and secluded life. Under the glamour of her presence, idleness became delightful, for the first time in the existence of this busy, eager, ambitious man. All his notions of method, of accuracy, of common sense even, he surrendered to this strange fascination. To be unreasonable was a virtue in a woman, if it was Lady Sylvia who was unreasonable. He laughed with pleasure one evening when, in a strenuous argument, she stated that seven times seven were fifty-six. It would have been stupid in a servant to have spilled the tea, but it was pretty when Lady Sylvia's small wrist was the cause of that mishap. And when, with her serious, timid eyes grown full of feeling, she pleaded the cause of the poor sailor sent to sea in rotten ships, he felt himself ready then to

go into the House and out-Plimsoll Plimsoll in his enthusiasm on behalf of so good a cause.

It was not altogether love in idleness. They had their occupations. First of all, she spent nearly a whole week in town choosing wall-colours, furniture, and pictures for that house in Piccadilly, though it was with a great shyness she went to the various places and expressed her opinion. During that week she saw a good deal more of London and of London life than commonly came within her experience. For one thing, she had the trembling delight of listening, from behind the grill, to Balfour making a short speech in the House. It was a terrible ordeal for her; her heart throbbed with anxiety, and she tore a pair of gloves into small pieces unknowingly. But as she drove home, she convinced herself, with a high exultation, that there was no man in the House who looked so distinguished as that one, that the stamp of a great statesman was visible in the square forehead and in the firm mouth, and that if the House knew as much as she knew, it would be more

anxious to listen for those words of wisdom which were to save a nation. Balfour's speech was merely a few remarks made in Committee. They were not of great importance. But when, next morning, she eagerly looked in the newspapers, and found what he had said condensed into a sentence, she was in a wild rage, and declared to her father that public men were treated shamefully in this country.

That business of re-furnishing the house in Piccadilly had been done perforce; it was with a far greater satisfaction that she set about decorating and preparing a spacious cottage, called The Lilacs, which was set in the midst of a pretty garden, some three miles from Willowby Park. Here, indeed, was pleasant work for her; and to her was entrusted the whole management of the thing, in Balfour's necessary absence in town. From day to day she rode over to see how the workmen were getting on. She sent up business-like reports to London. And at last she gently hinted that he might come down to see what had been done.

“Will you ride over, or drive?” said Lord

Willowby to his guest, after breakfast that morning.

“I am sure Mr. Balfour would rather walk, papa,” said Lady Sylvia, “for I have discovered a whole series of short-cuts, that I want to show him—across the fields. Unless it will tire you, papa?”

“It won’t tire me at all,” said Lord Willowby, with great consideration, “for I am not going. I have letters to write. But if you walk over, you must send Lock to the cottage with the horses, and ride back.”

Although they were profoundly disappointed that Lord Willowby could not accompany them, they set out on their walk with an assumed cheerfulness which seemed to conceal their inward grief. It was July now; but the morning was fresh and cool after the night’s rain, and there was a pleasant southerly breeze blowing the fleecy clouds across the blue sky, so that there was an abundance of light, motion, and colour all around them. The elms were rustling and swaying in the Park; the rooks were cawing; in the distance they saw a cloud of yellow

smoke arise from the road as the fresh breeze blew across.

She led him away by secret paths and wooded lanes, with here and there a stile to cross, and here and there a swinging gate to open. She was anxious he should know intimately all the surroundings of his future home ; and she seemed to be familiar with the name of every farm-house, every turnpike, every clump of trees in the neighbourhood. She knew the various plants in the hedges ; and he professed himself profoundly interested in learning their names. They crossed a bit of common now ; he had never known before how beautiful the flowers of a common were — the pale lemon-coloured hawkweed, the purple thyme, the orange and crimson-tipped bird's-foot trefoil. They passed through waving fields of rye ; he had never noticed before the curious sheen of grey produced by the wind on those billows of green. They came in sight of long undulations of wheat ; he vowed he had never seen in his life anything so beautiful as the brilliant scarlet of the poppies where the corn was scant. The happiness in

Lady Sylvia's face, when he expressed himself delighted with all these things, was something to see.

They came upon a gypsy encampment, apparently deserted by all but the women and children. One of the younger women immediately came out, and began the usual patter. Would not the pretty lady have her fortune told? She had many happy days in store for her; but she had a little temper of her own; and so forth. Lady Sylvia stood irresolute, bashful, rather inclined to submit to the ordeal for the amusement of the thing, and looking doubtfully at her companion as to whether he would approve. As for Balfour, he did not pay the slightest heed to the poor woman's jargon. His eye had been wandering over the encampment, apparently examining everything. And then he turned to the woman and began to question her, with a directness that startled her out of her trade-manner altogether. She answered him simply and seriously, though it was not a very direful tale she had to tell. When Balfour had got all the information he wanted, he gave the woman

half-a-sovereign, and passed on with his companion ; and of course Lady Sylvia said to herself that it was the abrupt sincerity, the force of character, in this man that compelled sincerity in others, and she was more than ever convinced that the like of him was not to be found in the world.

“ Well, Sylvia,” said he, when they reached The Lilacs, and had passed through the fragrant garden, “ you have really made it a charming place. It is a place one might pass one’s life away in—reading books, smoking, dreaming day-dreams.”

“ I hope you will always find rest and quiet in it,” said she in a low voice.

It was a long, irregular, two-storied cottage, with a verandah along the front ; and it was pretty well smothered in white roses. There was not much of a lawn ; for the ground facing the French windows had mostly been cut up into flower-beds—beds of turquoise-blue forget-me-nots, of white and speckled clove-pinks that sweetened all the air around, of various-hued pansies, and of white and purple columbine.

But the strong point of the cottage and the garden was its roses. There were roses everywhere—rose-bushes in the various plots, rose-trees covering the walls, roses in the tiny hall into which they passed when the old housekeeper made her appearance. “I’ll tell you who ought to live here, Sylvia,” said her companion. “That German fellow you were telling us about who lives close by—Count von Rosen. I never saw such roses in my life.”

Little adornment indeed was needed to make this retreat a sufficiently charming one; but all the same, Lady Sylvia had spent a vast amount of care on it, and her companion was delighted with the skill and grace in which the bare materials of the furniture which he had only seen in the London shops had been arranged. As they walked through the quaint little rooms, they did not say much to each other; for doubtless their minds were sufficiently busy in drawing pictures of the happy life they hoped to spend there.

Of course, all these nice things cost money. Balfour had been for some time drawing upon

his partners in a fashion which rather astonished those gentlemen ; for they had grown accustomed to calculate on the extreme economy of the young man. One morning the head clerk in the firm of Balfour, Skinner, Green and Co., in opening the letters, came upon one from Mr. Hugh Balfour, in which that gentleman gave formal notice that he would want a sum of £50,000 in cash on the 1st of August. When Mr. Skinner arrived, the head clerk put the letter before him. He did not turn pale, nor did he nervously break the paper-knife he held in his hand. He only said "Good Lord!" and then he added, "I suppose he must have it at any cost."

It was in the second week in August that Mr. Hugh Balfour, M.P. for Ballinascroon, was married to Lady Sylvia Blythe, only daughter of the Earl of Willowby, of Willowby Hall, Surrey ; and immediately after the marriage, the happy pair started off to spend their honeymoon in Germany.

CHAPTER XIII.

FIVE-ACE JACK.

WE will now let Mr. Balfour and his young and charming bride go off together on their wedding-trip—a trip that ought to give them some slight chance of becoming acquainted with each other, though a certain profound philosopher, resident in Surrey, would say that the glamour of impossible ideals was still veiling their eyes—and we will turn, if you please, to a very different sort of traveller, who just about the same time was riding along a cattle-trail on the high-lying and golden-yellow plains of Colorado. This was Buckskin Charlie—so named from the suit of grey buckskin which he wore, and which was liberally adorned with loose fringes cut from the leather. Indeed, there was a generally decorative air about this herdsman and his accoutre-

ments, which gave him a half-Mexican look, though the bright sun-tanned complexion, the long light brown hair, and the clear blue eyes were not at all Mexican. There was a brass tip to the high pommel in front of him, round which a lasso was coiled. He wore huge wooden stirrups which looked like sabots with the heels cut out. The rowels of his spurs were an inch and a half in diameter. And the wiry little pony he rode had both mane and tail long and flowing.

It is a pleasant enough morning for a ride, for on these high-lying plains the air is cool and exhilarating even in the glare of the sunshine. The prospect around him is pleasant, too, though Buckskin Charlie probably does not mind that much. He has long ago got accustomed to the immeasurable breadth of billowy prairie-land, the low yellow-brown waves of which stretch away out into the west until they meet with the range of the Rocky Mountains—a wall of ethereal blue standing all along the western horizon, here and there showing a patch of shining white. And he is familiar enough, too, with the only

living objects visible—a herd of antelope quietly grazing in the shadow of some distant and low-lying bluffs; an occasional chicken-hawk that lifts its heavy and bespeckled wings and makes away for the water in the nearest gully; and everywhere the friendly little prairie-dog, standing up on his hillock like a miniature kangaroo, and coolly staring at him as he passes. Buckskin Charlie is not hungry, and therefore takes no interest in natural history.

It is a long ride across the plains from Eagle Creek ranch to New Minneapolis, but this important place is reached at last. It is a pretty little hamlet of wooden cottages, with a brick school-house, and a small church of the like material. It has a few cotton-wood trees about. It is irrigated by a narrow canal which connects with a tributary of the South Platte.

Buckskin Charlie rides up to the chief shop of this hamlet, and dismounts, leaving his pony in charge of a lad. The shop is a sort of general store, kept by one Ephraim J. Greek, who is also, as a small sign indicates, a notary public, conveyancer, and real estate agent.

When Buckskin Charlie enters the store, Mr. Greek—a short, red-faced, red-haired person, who is generally addressed as Judge by his neighbours—is in the act of weighing out some sugar for a small girl who is at the counter.

“Hello, Charlie,” says the Judge, carelessly, as he continues weighing out the sugar, “how’s things at the ranch? And how is your health?”

“I want you to come right along,” says Charlie, without further ceremony. “The boss is just real bad.”

“You don’t say!”

Charlie looks for a second or two at the Judge getting the brown-paper bag, and then he says impatiently—

“He wants you to come right away, and he won’t stand no foolin—you bet.”

But the Judge is not to be hurried. He asks his small customer what else her mother wants, and then he turns leisurely to the sun-tanned messenger.

“Taint the fooist time, Charlie, the Colonel has been bad like that. Oh, I know. I knowed the Colonel before you ever set eyes on him—

yes, sir. I knowed him in Denver, when he was on'y Five-Ace Jack. But now he's the boss, and no mistake. Reckon he's doin' the big Bonanza business, and none o' your pea-nut consarns——”

Here Buckskin Charlie broke in with a number of words which showed that he was intimately familiar with Scripture, and might have led one to suppose that he meant to annihilate the dilatory Judge, but which, as it turned out, were only intended to emphasise his statement that the Colonel had branded 1,800 calves at the ranch last year, and had also got up 2,000 head from Texas. By the time this piece of information had been delivered and received, the wants of the small girl in front of the counter had been satisfied; and then the Judge, having gone out and borrowed a neighbour's pony, set forth with his impatient companion for Eagle Creek ranch.

On the way they had a good deal of familiar talk about the boss, or the Colonel, as he was indifferently called; and the Judge, now in a friendly mood, told Buckskin Charlie some

things he did not know before about his master. Their conversation, however, was so saturated with Biblical lore that it may be advisable to give here a simpler and plainer history of the owner of Eagle Creek ranch. To begin with, he was an Englishman. He was born in Cumberland, and as a young fellow achieved some little notoriety as a wrestler; in fact, that was all the work his parents could get out of him. It was in vain that they paid successive sums to have him apprenticed to that business, or made a partner in this; Jack Sloane was simply a ne'er-do-well, blessed with a splendid physique, a high opinion of his own importance, and a distinguished facility in wheedling people into lending him money. Such was his position in England when the rush to California occurred. Here was Jack's opportunity. His mother wept bitter tears when she parted with him; but nobody else was affected to the same extent.

As a gold-digger Jack was a failure, but he soon managed to pick up an amazing knowledge of certain games of cards, insomuch that his combined luck and skill got for him the com-

plimentary title of Five-Ace Jack. Whether he made money or not at this profession does not appear, for at this point there is a gap in his history. When his relatives in England—among whom, I regret to say, was a young lady incidentally alluded to in the first chapter of this story—next heard of him, he was in Texas, employed at a ranch there. No one ever knew what had made the social atmosphere of San Francisco rather too sultry for Five-Ace Jack.

Then the Pike's Peak craze occurred—in 1859; and once again Jack was induced to join the general rush. He arrived at Denver just as the bubble had burst. He found a huge multitude of people grown mad with disappointment, threatening to burn down the few wooden shanties and canvas tents that then constituted the town, and more especially to hang incontinently an esteemed friend of the present writer, who had just issued the first numbers of the *Rocky Mountain News*. Then the great crowd of bummers and loafers, not finding the soil teeming with nuggets, stam-

peded off like a herd of buffalo, leaving a few hardy and adventurous spirits to explore the neighbouring canyons, and find out by hard work whether or not gold existed there in paying quantities. Jack Sloane remained behind also—in Denver. He started what was called a whiskey saloon in a tent, but what was really a convenient little gambling-hell for those who had grown reckless. Times grew better. Rumours came down from the mountains that the gulch and placer mines, which had been opened, were giving a fair yield ; here and there—as for example in the Clear Creek canyon—a vein of rotten quartz had been struck, containing free gold in surprising richness. Now was Jack's time. He opened a keno and faro bank in a wooden shanty ; and he charged only 10 per cent. on the keno winnings. He was an adept at euchre and poker, and was always willing to lend a hand ; his chief peculiarity being that he invariably chose that side of the table which enabled him to face the door so that he might not be taken unawares by an unfriendly shot. He drove a rousing trade. The miners came

down from "the Rockies" with their bags of gold dust ready open to pay for a frolic; and Five-Ace Jack received a liberal percentage from the three card-monte men who entertained these innocent folks. But for a sad accident Jack might have remained at Denver, and become an exemplary member of society. He might have married one of the young ladies of accommodating manners who had even then managed to wander out to that western town. He and she might at the present moment have been regarded as one of the twelve "Old Families" of Denver, who, beginning for the most part as he began, are now demonstrating their respectability by building churches like mad, and by giving balls which, in the favoured language of the place, are described as "quite the toniest things going." But fortune had a grudge against Jack.

There was an ill-favoured rascal called Bully Bill, who was coming in from the plains one day, when he found two Indians following him. To shoot first, and then ask the Indians' intentions afterwards, was the rule in these parts;

and accordingly Bully Bill fired, bringing one Indian down, the other riding off as hard as he could go. The conqueror thought he would have the scalp of his enemy, as a proof of his valour ; but he was a bad hand at the business, and as he was slowly endeavouring to get at the trophy, he found that the other Indian had mustered up courage and was coming back. There was no time to lose. He simply hewed the dead Indian's head off, jumped on his pony, and, after an exciting chase, reached the town in safety. Then he carried the head into Five-Ace Jack's saloon, and as there were a few of the boys there, ready for fun, they got up an auction for that ghastly prize. It was knocked down at no less a sum than 200 dollars—a price which so fired the brain of Bully Bill that he went in wildly for playing cards. But Five-Ace Jack never played cards wildly, and he was of the party. He observed that not only did Bully Bill lose steadily, but also that his losses seemed to vex him much ; and, in fact, just as the last of the 200 dollars were disappearing, he was surprised and deeply pained to

find that Bully Bill was trying to cheat. This touched Jack's conscience, and he remonstrated; whereupon there was a word or two; and then Jack drew his shooter out and shot Bully Bill through the head. They respectfully placed the body on two chairs, and Jack called for some drinks.

This incident ought to have caused no great trouble; for at that time there was no Union Pacific Railroad Company—a troublesome body, which has ere now impeached judge, jury, and prisoner, all in a lump, for a conspiracy to defeat the ends of justice, when some notorious offender has got off scot free. But Bully Bill had three brothers up in the mountains; and Jack was of opinion that, if he remained in Denver, his mind would be troubled with many cares. However, he had amassed a good deal of money in this gambling-hell of his; and so he was able to persuade a few of his meaner dependents to strike their tents along with him, and go out into the wilderness. He wandered over the plains until he saw a good place for a ranch—not a stock-raising

ranch, but a place to accommodate the droves of pilgrims who were then slowly and laboriously making their way to the west. He built his ranch about a hundred yards back from the waggon-route ; and calmly awaited custom.

But even in these peaceful solitudes, if all stories be true—and we in England heard nothing of Jack Sloane for many years—he did not quite desist from his evil ways. Finding, first of all, that many of the waggon-parties went by without calling in at his ranch, he and his men dug a large pit right across the route, so that the drivers had perforce to turn aside and come right up to his hostelry. Then he stationed a blacksmith a mile or two down the road, for the greater convenience of the travellers, who were always glad to have the feet of their mules and oxen examined. It was very singular, however, that between the blacksmith's shop and Jack's ranch, so many of the animals should go lame ; but what did that matter, when Jack was willing to exchange a perfectly fresh team for the tired team, a little consideration of money being added ? It is true that the lame oxen became

rapidly well so soon as they were left in Jack's possession; but was not that all the more lucky for the next comers, who were sure to find something wrong with their teams between the blacksmith's shop and Eagle Creek ranch?

Another peculiarity of this part of the plains was that the neighbourhood seemed to be infested with Indians, who, whether they were Utes or Arapahoes, showed a surprising knowledge as to which waggon-trains were supplied with the most valuable cattle, and never stampeded an indifferent lot. These attacks were made at night; and doubtless the poor travellers, stunned by the yells of the red men and the firing of guns and revolvers, were glad to escape with their lives. But on one occasion, it is rumoured, an Indian would appear to have been hurt, for he was heard to exclaim, in a loud voice, "*Holy Jabers! Me fut! Me fut!*" Neither the Utes nor the Arapahoes, it was remembered, pronounce the word "foot" in that fashion, even when they happen to know English; and so it came about that, always after that, there were ugly rumours about Eagle Creek ranch and the men who lived

there. But not even the stoutest bull-whacker who ever crossed the plains would dare to say a word on this subject to Five-Ace Jack; he would have had a bullet through his head for his pains.

And now we take leave of "Five-Ace Jack," for in his subsequent history he appears as "Colonel Sloane," "the Colonel," or "the boss." As he grew more rich, he became more honest, as has happened in the case of many worthy people. His flocks and his herds increased. He closed the ranch as a place of entertainment—indeed, people were beginning now to talk of all sorts of other overland routes ; but he made it the centre of a vast stock-rearing farm, which he superintended with great assiduity. He was an imperious master with his herders—the physical force that was always ready to give effect to his decisions was a weapon that stuck upright in the south-east corner of his trousers ; but he was a just master and paid his men punctually. Moreover, bygones being bygones, he had made an excursion or two up into "the Rockies," and had become possessed of one or two mines, which, though they were now only paying working

expenses, promised well. Time flies fast in the west; people come and go rapidly. When Colonel Sloane stopped at the Grand Central of Denver, and drank petroleum-champagne at four dollars a bottle at that pretentious, dirty, and disagreeable hostelry, there was no one to recognise him as Five-Ace Jack. He was cleanly shaved; his linen was as brilliant as Chinese skill and Colorado air could make it; he could have helped to build a church with any of them. But somehow he never cared to remain long within the precincts of Denver; he was either up at Idaho, looking after his mines, or out at the ranch, looking after his herdsmen.

It was towards this ranch that Buckskin Charlie and Judge Greek were now riding, on this cool, clear, beautiful morning. All around them shone the golden-yellow prairie, an immeasurable sea of grass and flowers; above them shone the clear sky of Colorado, far away on their right the world was enclosed by the pale, transparent blue of the long wall of mountains. Eagle Creek ranch was a lonely-looking place, as they neared it. The central portion

of the buildings spoke of the times when the Indians—the real Indians, not Five-Ace Jack and his merry men—were in the habit of scouring the plains; for it was a block-house, built of heavy logs of pine. But from this initial point branched out all sorts of buildings and enclosures—sheds, pens, stables, and what not, some of them substantially erected, and others merely made of cotton-wood fence. Out there they speak disrespectfully of cotton-wood, because of its habit of twisting itself into extraordinary shapes. It is admitted, however, by the settlers that this very habit defeats the most perverse ingenuity on the part of a hog; for the hog, intending breaking away, fancies he has got outside the fence, whereas, owing to the twisting of the wood, he is still in the inside.

The Colonel lay in his bed, thinking neither of his hogs nor of his pens, nor yet of his vast herds of cattle roaming over the fenceless prairie-land. The long, muscular, bony frame was writhing in pain; the black, dishevelled hair was wet with perspiration; the powerful hands clutched and wrung the coarse bed-clothing.

But the Colonel had all his wits about him; and when Mr. Greek, approaching him, began to offer some expressions of sympathy, he was bidden to mind his own business in language of quite irrelevant force. Buckskin Charlie was ordered to bring in his master's writing-desk, which was the only polished piece of furniture in the ranch. Then the Colonel, making a powerful effort to control his writhings, proceeded to give his instructions.

He was not going to die yet, the Colonel said. He had had these fits before. It was only a tough antelope-steak, followed by a hard ride, and a consuming thirst too hastily quenched. But here he was, on his back; and as he had nothing else to do, he wanted the Judge to put down on paper his wishes and intentions with regard to his property. The Colonel admitted that he was a rich man. Himself could not tell what head of cattle he owned. He had two placer mines in the Clear Creek canyon; and he had been offered 12,000 dollars for the celebrated Belle of St. Joe, up near George-town. He had a house at Idaho Springs. He had a share in

a bank at Denver. Now the Colonel, in short and sharp sentences, interrupted by a good deal of writhing and hard swearing, said he would not leave a brass farthing—a red cent was what he actually mentioned—to any of his relatives who had known him in England, for the reason that they knew too much about him, and would be only too glad that he was gone. But there was a young girl who was a niece of his. He doubted whether she had ever seen him; if she had, it must have been when she was a child. He had a photograph of her, however, taken two or three years before, and she was a good-looking lass. Well, he did not mind leaving his property to her, under one or two conditions. There he paused for a time.

Five-Ace Jack was a cunning person, and he had brooded over this matter during many a lonely ride over the plains. He did not want his money to go amongst those relatives of his, who doubtless—though they heard but little about him—regarded him as a common scoundrel. But if he could get this pretty niece of his to come out to the Far West with her husband,

might they not be induced to remain there, and hold and retain that property that had cost the owner so much trouble to pull together? If they disliked the roughness of the ranch, could anything be more elegant than the white wooden villa at Idaho, with its verandah and green blinds? Then he considered that it was a long way for her to come. If she had children—and she might have, for it was two or three years since he heard she was married—the trouble and anxiety of bringing them all the way from England would dispose her to take a gloomy view of the place. Surely it was not too hard a condition that, in consideration of their getting so large a property, this young Bell and her husband should come out, free from encumbrances of all sorts, to live one year in Colorado, either at Idaho or at Eagle Creek ranch, just as they chose?

Both the Colonel and the Judge were bachelors; and it did not occur to either of them, when that condition was put down on paper, that a young woman on this side of the water could be so foolish as to get up with flashing

eyes and say—as actually happened in less than a year afterwards—that not for all the cattle in Colorado, and not for all the gold in the Rocky Mountains, and not for twenty times all the diamonds that were ever gotten out of Golconda, would she leave her poor, dear, darling, defenceless children for a whole year. Just as little did they think, when this memorandum was finally handed over to the Judge to be drawn out in proper form, that any proceeding on the part of Five-Ace Jack, of Eagle Creek ranch, could have the slightest possible influence on the fortunes of Lady Sylvia Balfour. Jack was a Colorado ranchman ; Lady Sylvia was the daughter of an English earl.

CHAPTER XIV.

FIRST EXPERIENCES.

MARRIAGE is in legal phrase the “highest consideration ;” even the cold and unromantic eye of the law perceives that the fact of a woman giving herself up, body and soul, to a man, is more than an equivalent for any sort of marriage-settlement. But at no period of the world’s history was it ever contemplated that a woman’s immediate duty, on becoming a wife, was forthwith to efface her own individuality. Now this was what Lady Sylvia deliberately set about doing, in the first flush of her wifely devotion. As she had married the very source and fountain-head of all earthly wisdom, what use was there in her retaining opinions of her own ? Henceforth she was to have always at her side the lawgiver, the arbiter, the infallible authority ;

she would surrender to his keeping all her beliefs just as she implicitly surrendered her trunks. She never thought twice about her new dresses: what railway-guard could withstand that terrible, commanding eye?

Now, little has been said to the point in these pages about Balfour, if it has not been shown that he was a man of violent prejudices. Perhaps he was not unlike other people in that respect; except in so far as he took little pains to conceal his opinions. But if there was anything likely to cure him of prejudices it was to see them mimicked in the faithful and loving mirror now always by his side; for how could he help laughing at the unintentional distortions? He had been a bitter opponent of the Second Empire, while that bubble still glittered in the political atmosphere; but surely that was no reason why Lady Sylvia should positively refuse to remain in Paris?

“Gracious goodness,” said he, “have you acquired a personal dislike for thirty millions of people? You may take my word for it, Sylvia, that as all you are likely to know about the

French is by travelling among them, they are the nicest people in the world, so far as that goes. Look at the courtesy of the officials—look at the trouble a working-man, or a peasant, will take to put you in the right road. Believe me, you may go further and fare worse. Wait, for example, till you make your first plunge into Germany. Wait till you see the Germans on board a Rhine steamer — their manners to strangers, their habits of eating——”

“ And then ? ” she said, “ am I to form my opinion of the Germans from that ? Do foreigners form their opinion of England by looking at a steamer-load of people going to Margate ? ”

“ Sylvia,” said he, “ I command you to love the French.”

“ I won’t,” she said.

But this defiant disobedience was only the curious result of a surrender of her own opinions. She was prepared to dislike thirty millions of human beings merely because he had expressed detestation of Louis Napoleon. And when he ended the argument with a laugh, the laugh was not altogether against her. From that mo-

ment he determined to seize every opportunity of pointing out to her the virtues of the French.

Of course it was very delightful to him to have for his companion one who came quite fresh to all those wonders of travel which lie close around our own door. One does not often meet nowadays with a young lady who has not seen, for example, the Rhine under moonlight. Lady Sylvia had never been out of England. It seemed to her that she had crossed interminable distances, and left her native country in a different planet altogether, when she reached Brussels, and she could not understand her husband when he said that in the Rue Montagne de la Cour he had always the impression that he had just stepped round the corner from Regent Street. And she tried to imagine what she would do in these remote places of the earth if she were all by herself—without this self-reliant guide and champion, who seemed to care no more for the awful and mysterious officials about railway-stations and the entrances to palaces than he would for the humble and familiar English policeman. The great deeds

of chivalry were poor in her eyes compared with the splendid battle waged by her husband against extortion ; the field of Waterloo was nearly witnessing another fearful scene of bloodshed, all because of a couple of francs. Then the Rhine, on the still moonlight night, from the high balcony in Cologne, with the coloured lights of the steamers moving to and fro—surely it was he alone who was the creator of this wonderful scene. That he was the creator of some of her delight in it was probable enough.

Finally, they settled down in the little village of Rolandseck ; and now, in this quiet retreat, after the hurry and bustle of travelling was over and gone, they were thrown more directly on each other's society, and left to find out whether they could find in the companionship of each other a sufficient means of passing the time. That, indeed, is the peril of the honeymoon period, and it has been the origin of a fair amount of mischief. You take a busy man away from all his ordinary occupations, and you take a young girl away from all her domestic and other pursuits, while as yet neither knows very

much about the other, and while they have no common objects of interest—no business affairs, nor house affairs, nor children to talk about—and you expect them to amuse each other day after day, and day after day. Conversation, in such circumstances, is apt to dwindle down into very small rills indeed, unless when it is feared that silence may be construed into regret, and then a forced effort is made to pump up the waters. Moreover, Rolandseck, though one of the most beautiful places in the world, is a place in which one finds it desperately hard to pass the time. There is the charming view, no doubt, and the Balfours had corner rooms, whence they could see, under the changing lights of morning, of midday, of sunset, and moonlight, the broad and rushing river, the picturesque island, the wooded and craggy heights, and the mystic range of the Drachenfels. But the days were still, sleepy, monotonous. Balfour, seated in the garden just over the river, would get the *Kölnische* or the *Allgemeine*, and glance at the brief telegram headed *Grossbritannien*, which told all that was consi-

dered to be worth telling about his native country. Or, together, they would clamber up through the warm vineyards to the rocky heights by Roland's Tower, and there let the dreamy hours go by in watching the shadows cross the blue mountains, in following the small steamers and the greater rafts as they passed down the stream, in listening to the tinkling of the cattle-bells in the valley below. How many times a day did Balfour cross over by the swinging ferry to the small bathing-house on the other side, and there plunge into the clear, cold, rushing green waters? Somehow the days passed.

And, on the whole, they passed pleasantly. In England there was absolutely nothing going on that could claim any one's attention ; the first absolute hush of the recess was unbroken even by those wandering voices that, later on, murmur of politics in unfrequented places. All the world had gone idling ; if a certain young lady had wished to assume at once the *rôle* she had sketched out for herself—of becoming the solace and comfort of the tired legislator—there was

no chance for her in England at least. Perhaps, on the whole, she was better occupied here in learning something about the nature of the man with whom she proposed to spend a lifetime. And here, too, in these quiet solitudes, Balfour occasionally abandoned his usual bantering manner, and gave her glimpses of a deep under-current of feeling, of the existence of which not even his most intimate friends were aware. When, as they walked alone in the still evenings, with the cool wind stirring the avenues of walnut-trees, and the moonlight beginning to touch the mists lying about Nonnenwerth and over the river, he talked to her as he had never talked to any human being before. And curiously enough, when his love for this newly-found companion sought some expression that would satisfy himself, he found it in snatches of old songs that his nurse, a Lowland Scotchwoman, had sung to him in his childhood. He had never read these lyrics. He knew nothing of their literary value. It was only as echoes that they came into his memory now; and yet they satisfied him in giving something of form to his

own fancies. He did not repeat them to her ; but as he walked with her, these old phrases, and chance refrains, seemed to suggest themselves quite naturally. Surely it was of her that this was written !—

*O saw ye my wee thing, and saw ye my ain thing,
And saw ye my true love down on yon lea ?
Crossed she the meadow yestreen at the gloaming,
Sought she the burnie where flowers the haw-tree ?
Her hair it is lint-white, her skin it is milk-white,
Dark is the blue o' her saft rollin' ee,
Red, red her ripe lips and sweeter than roses,
Where could my wee thing wander frae me ?*

Or this, again :

*Her bower casement is latticed wi' flowers,
Tied up wi' siller thread,
And courtly sits she in the midst,
Men's langing eyes to feed.
She waves the ringlets frae her cheek
Wi' her milky, milky han' ;
And her cheeks seem touched wi' the finger o' God,
My bonnie Lady Ann !*

He forgot that he was in the Rhine-land—the very cradle of lyrical romance. He did not associate this fair companion with any book whatever ; the feelings that she stirred were

deeper down than that, and they found expression in phrases that had years and years ago become a part of his nature. He forgot all about Uhland, Heine, and the rest of the sweet and pathetic singers who have thrown a glamour over the Rhine-valley ; it was the songs of his boyhood that occurred to him.

*Like dew on the gowan lying
Is the fa' o' her fairy feet,
And like winds in the summer sighing,
Her voice is low and sweet.*

The lines are simple enough. Perhaps they are even commonplace. But they sufficed.

It must be said, however, that Balfour was the reverse of an effusive person ; and this young wife very speedily discovered that his bursts of tender confidences were likely to be few and far between. He was exceedingly chary of using endearing phrases ; more especially if there was a third person present. Now she had been used to elaborate and studied expressions of affection. There was a good deal of histrionics about Lord Willowby. He got into violent rages with his servants about

the merest trifles ; but these rages were as pre-determined as those of the First Napoleon are said to have been ; he found that it answered his purpose to have his temper feared. On the other hand, his affection for his daughter was expressed on all occasions with profuse phraseology—a phraseology that was a trifle mawkish and artificial when heard by others, but which was not so to the object of it. She had grown accustomed to it. To her it was but natural language. Doubtless she had been taught to believe that all affection expressed itself in that way.

Here, again, she tried to school herself. Convinced—by these rare moments of self-disclosure—that the love he bore her was the deepest and strongest feeling of his nature, she would be content to do without continual protestation of it. She would have no lip-service. Did not reticence in such matters arise from the feeling that there were emotions and relations too sacred to be continually flaunted before the public gaze ? Was she to distrust the man who had married her because he did not prate of his

affection for her within the hearing of servants ?

The reasoning was admirable ; the sentiment that prompted it altogether praiseworthy. But before a young wife begins to efface her personality in this fashion, she ought to make sure that she has not much personality to speak of. Lady Sylvia had a good deal. In these Surrey solitudes, thrown greatly in on herself for companionship, she had acquired a certain seriousness of character. She had very definite conceptions of the various duties of life ; she had decided opinions on many points ; she had, like other folks, a firmly-fixed prejudice or two. For her to imagine that she could wipe out her own individuality, as if it were a sum on a slate, and inscribe in its stead a whole series of new opinions, was mere folly. It was prompted by the most generous of motives ; but it was folly none the less. Obviously, too, it was a necessary corollary of this effort at self-surrender, or rather self-effacement, that her husband should not be made aware of it ; she would be to him not what she was, but what she thought she ought to be.

Hyper-subtleties of fancy and feeling? the result of delicate rearing, a sensitive temperament, and a youth spent much in solitary self-communion? Perhaps they were! but they were real for all that. They were not affectations, but facts—facts involving as important issues as the simpler feelings of less complex and cultivated natures. To her they were so real, so all-important, that the whole current of her life was certain to be guided by them.

During this pleasant season, but one slight cloud crossed the shining heaven of their new life. They had received letters in the morning: in the evening, as they sate at dinner, Lady Sylvia suddenly said to her husband—with a sort of childish happiness in her face—

“Oh, Hugh, how delightful it must be to be a very rich person. I am eagerly looking forward to that first thousand pounds—it is a whole thousand pounds all at once, is it not? Then you must put it in a bank for me, and let me have a cheque-book.”

“I wonder what you will do with it,” said he. “I never could understand what women

did with their private money. I suppose they make a pretence of paying for their own dress—but as a matter of fact they have everything given them—jewellery, flowers, bonnets, gloves——”

“I know,” said she, with a slight blush, “what I should like to do with my money.”

“Well?” said he. Of course she had some romantic notion in her head. She would open a co-operative store for the benefit of the inhabitants of Happiness Alley, and make Mrs. Grace the superintendent. She would procure “a day in the country” for all the children in the slums of Seven Dials. She would start a fund for erecting a gold statue to Mr. Plimsoll.

“You know,” said she, with an embarrassed smile, “that papa is very poor, and I think those business matters have been harassing him more than ever of late. I am sure, Hugh, dear, you are quite right about women not needing money of their own—at least, I know I have never felt the want of it much. And now don’t you think it would please poor papa if I were to surprise him some morning with a cheque for a

whole thousand pounds ! I should feel myself a millionnaire."

He showed no surprise, or vexation. He merely said, in a cold way—

" If it would please you, Sylvia, I see no objection."

But immediately after dinner he went out, saying he meant to go for a walk to some village on the other side of the Rhine—too distant for her to go. He lit a cigar, and went down to the ferry. The good-natured ferryman, who knew Balfour well, said "'n Abend, Herr." Why should this sulky-browed man mutter in reply, "The swindling old heathen !" It was quite certain that Balfour could not have referred to the friendly ferryman.

He walked away along the dusty and silent road, in the gathering twilight, puffing his cigar fiercely.

" At it already," he was saying to himself bitterly. " He could not let a week pass. And the child comes to me with her pretty ways, and says, ' Oh, won't you pity this poor old swindler ? ' And of course I am an impression-

able young man; and in the first flush of conjugal gratitude and enthusiasm I will do whatever she asks ; and so the letter comes within the very first week ! By the Lord, I will stop that kind of thing as soon as I get back to London ! ”

He returned to the hotel about ten o'clock. Lady Sylvia had gone to her room ; he went there, and found her crying bitterly. And, as she would not tell him why she was in such grief, how could he be expected to know ? He thought he had acted very generously in at once acceding to her proposal ; and there could not be the slightest doubt that the distance to that particular village was much too great for her to attempt.

CHAPTER XV.

A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

At breakfast next morning, Lady Sylvia appeared as cheerful as possible. She was quite talkative; and was more charmed than ever with the beauties of the Rhine. No reference was made to that little incident of the previous evening.

She had been schooling herself as usual. Was it not natural for him to show some resentment at this foolish school-girl notion of presenting a £1000 bank-note to her father? Her husband could not be expected to share in her romantic notions. He was a man of the world. And had he not shown his generosity and unfailing consideration in not only assenting to her proposal, but in going off to conceal his natural disapproval? Her woman's eyes had been too quick; that was all.

On the other hand, Balfour, delighted to find his young wife in such good spirits, could not think of reviving a matter which might lead to a quarrel. She might give her father the thousand pounds, and welcome. Only he, Balfour, would take very good care, as soon as he got back to England, that that was the last application of the kind.

Now the truth was, there had been no such application. Lord Willowby had written to his daughter, and she had received the letter; but there was not in it a single word referring to money matters. A simple inquiry, and a simple explanation, would have prevented all this unpleasantness, which might leave traces behind it. Why had not these been forthcoming? Why, indeed! How many months before was it that Balfour was urging his sweetheart to fix an early day for their wedding, on the earnest plea that marriage was the only guarantee against misunderstandings? Only with marriage came perfect confidence. Marriage was to be the perpetual safeguard against the dangers of separation, the interference of friends, the

mischief wrought by rumour. In short, marriage was to bring about the millennium. That is a belief that has got into the heads of a good many young people besides Mr. Hugh Balfour and Lady Sylvia Blythe.

But as they were now quite cheerful and pleased with each other, what more was wanted? And it was a bright and beautiful day; and soon the steamer would be coming up the river to take them on to Coblenz, that they might go up the Moselle. As they stood on the small wooden pier, Lady Sylvia, looking abroad on the beautiful panorama of crag, and island, and river, said to her husband in a low voice—

“Shall we ever forget this place? And the still days we spent here?”

“I will give you this advice, Sylvia,” said he. “If you want to remember Rolandseck, don’t keep any photograph of it in England. That will only deaden and vulgarize the place; and you will gradually have the photograph dispossessing your memory picture. Look, now, and remember. Look at the colour of the Rhine, and the shadows under the trees of the

island there, and the sunshine on those blue mountains. Don't you think you will always be able to remember?"

She did not look at all. She suddenly turned away her head, for she did not wish him to see that her eyes had filled. It was not the last time she was to look at Rolandseck—or rather at the beautiful picture that memory painted of it—through the mist of tears.

"Hello!" cried her husband, as they were stepping on board the *Kaiser Wilhelm*, "I'm hanged if there isn't Billy Bolitho!"

"Who is he?" said she, timidly; her first impulse was to shrink from meeting any stranger.

"Oh, the best fellow in the world!" said Balfour, who appeared to be greatly pleased. He is a Parliamentary agent. Now you will hear all that's been going on. Bolitho knows everybody and everything; and besides, he is the best of fellows himself."

Mr. Bolitho, with much discretion, did his utmost to avoid running against these two young people; but that was of no use. Balfour

hunted him up, and brought him along to introduce him to Lady Sylvia. He was an elderly gentleman, with silvery white whiskers, a bland and benevolent face, and remarkably shrewd and humorous eyes. He was very respectful to Lady Sylvia. He remarked to her that he had the pleasure of knowing her father; as Balfour put in, it would have been hard to find any one whom Mr. Bolitho did not know.

And how strange it was, after these still days in the solitude by the Rhine, to plunge back again into English politics! The times were quiet enough in England itself just at the moment; but great events had recently been happening, and these afforded plenty of matter for eager discussion and speculation. Lady Sylvia listened intently; was it not part of her education? She heard their guesses as to the political future. Would the Prime Minister be forced to dissolve before the Spring? Or would he not wait to see the effect on the country of the reconstruction of the Cabinet, and appear in February with a fascinating Budget, which would charm all men's hearts, and pave the way for a

triumphant majority at the General Election? All this she could follow pretty well. She was puzzled when they spoke of the alleged necessity of the Prime Minister seeking re-election on assuming the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer; and she did not quite know what League it was that was likely to oppose—according to rumour—the re-election at Birmingham of a statesman who had just been taken into the Cabinet. But all this about the chances of a dissolution she could understand pretty well; and was it not of sufficient interest to her, considering that her husband's seat in the House was in peril?

But when they got into the *personnel* of politics she was lost altogether. There were rumours of a still further reconstruction of the Ministry; and the chances of appointments falling to such and such people brought out such a host of details about the position of various men whose names even were unknown to her that she got not a little bewildered. And surely this garrulous, bland old gentleman talked with a dreadful cynicism about public affairs—or rather

about the men engaged in them. And was not his talk affecting her husband too? Was it true that these were the real objects which caused this man to pose as a philanthropist and the other to preside at religious meetings? She began to find less and less humour in these remarks of Mr. Bolitho. She would like to have carried her husband away from the sphere of his evil influence.

"I suppose now, Balfour," said he, "you have been taking a look round? You know, of course, that Ballinascoor will make short work of you?"

"Yes, I know that," said the other.

"Well," said Mr. Bolitho, "they say we shan't know what the Government mean to do until Bright's speech in October. I have a suspicion that something besides that will happen in October. They may fancy a bold challenge would tell. Now, suppose there was a dissolution, where would you be?"

"Flying all over the country, I suppose—Evesham, Shoreham, Woodstock, Harwich, anywhere—seeing where I could get some rest for the sole of my foot."

“If I were you,” said Mr. Bolitho, “I would not trust to a postponement of the dissolution till the Spring. I would take my measures now.”

“Very well, but where? Come, Bolitho, put me on to a good thing. I know you have always half-a-dozen boroughs in your pocket.”

“Well,” said Mr. Bolitho to Lady Sylvia, with a cheerful smile, “your husband wishes to make me out a person of some importance, doesn’t he? But it is really an odd coincidence that I should run across him to-day; for as it happens, I am going on to Mainz to see Eugy Chorley, and that is a man of whom you might fairly say that he carries a borough in his pocket—Englebury.”

“That’s old Harnden’s place—what a shame it would be to try to oust the old fellow!” said Balfour.

“Oh, he is good for nothing!” said Mr. Bolitho, gaily. “He ought to be in a bath-chair, at Brighton. Besides, he is very unpopular; he has been spending no money lately. And I suppose you have got to oust somebody somewhere if you mean to sit in the House.”

"But what are his politics?" said Lady Sylvia, to this political pagan.

"Oh, nothing in particular! Formerly, if there was a free fight going on anywhere, he was sure to be in it—though you never could tell on which side. Now he limits himself to an occasional growl."

"And you would have my husband try to turn out this poor old gentleman?" said Lady Sylvia, with some indignation.

"Why not?" said Mr. Bolitho, with a charming smile. "How many men has Harnden turned out in his time, I wonder! Now, Lady Sylvia, you could be of great use to your husband if you and he would only come straight on with me to Mainz. Mr. Chorley and his wife are at the —— Hotel. He is a solicitor at Englebury—he is the great man there—does all the parochial business—is a friend of the Duke's—in short, he can do what he likes at Englebury. Your husband would have to conciliate him, you know, by putting a little business in his way—buying a few farms or houses on speculation and selling them again. Or stay,

this is better. Eugy wants to sell a few acres of land he himself has. I believe he stole the piece from the side of an out-of-the-way common —first had a ditch cut for drainage, then put up a few posts, then a wire to keep children from tumbling in, then, a couple of years after, he boldly ran a fence round and cleared the place inside. I suppose no one dared to interfere with a man who had the private affairs of every one in the parish in his hands. Well, I think Mr. Chorley, when he sees all this fuss going on about enclosures, sometimes gets uneasy. Now your husband might buy this land of him."

"For what purpose, pray?" demanded Lady Sylvia, with some dignity. "Do I understand you that this land was stolen from the poor people of the village?"

"Yes," said Mr. Bolitho, coolly. "And your husband could give it back to them—make a public green of it, and put up a gymnasium. That would have to be done after the election, of course."

"And how do you propose that I should aid my husband?" asked Lady Sylvia. Balfour,

who was listening in silent amusement, could not understand why she grew more and more chill in her demeanour.

“Oh,” said Mr. Bolitho, with a shrewd smile, “you will have to conciliate Mrs. Chorley, who is much the more terrible person of the two. I am afraid, Lady Sylvia, you don’t know much about politics.”

“No,” said Lady Sylvia, coldly.

“Of course not—not to be expected. She won’t be hard in her catechising. But there are one or two points she is rather fierce about. You will have to let the English Church go.”

“To let the English Church go?” said Lady Sylvia, doubtfully.

“I mean as a political institution.”

“But it is not a political institution,” said Lady Sylvia, firmly.

“I mean as a political question, then,” said Mr. Bolitho, blandly. “Pray don’t imagine that I am in favour of disestablishment, Lady Sylvia. It is not my business to have any opinions. I dare not belong either to the Reform or to the Carlton. I was merely pointing

out that if Mrs. Chorley speaks about disestablishment, it would not be worth your while to express any decided view, supposing you were not inclined to agree with her. That is all. You see, Mrs. Chorley is the daughter of the great Quakeress, Mrs. Dew—of course you have heard of her ?—”

“ No, I have not,” said Lady Sylvia.

“ Dear me ! Before your time, I suppose. But she was a delightful old woman—the dearest little old lady ! How well I remember her ! She used to live in Bloomsbury Square, and she had supper-parties every Tuesday and Friday evenings ; it is five-and-thirty years ago since I went to those parties. Mrs. Dew was a widow, you know, and she presided at the table ; and when supper was over she used to get up and propose a series of toasts in the most delightful prim and precise manner. She was a great politician, you must understand. And many men used to come there of an evening who became very celebrated persons afterwards. Dear me, it’s a long time since then ! But I shall never forget the little woman standing up with

a glass of toast-and-water in her hand—she did not drink wine—and giving the health of some distinguished guest, or begging them to drink to the success of a Bill before the House; and we always drank her health before we left, and she used to give us such a pretty little old-fashioned curtsey. Mrs. Chorley,” added Mr. Bolitho, with a grim smile, “is not quite such another.”

“But do you mean,” said Lady Sylvia, with some precision, “that because Mrs. Chorley is the daughter of a Quakeress, I am to pretend to wish for the destruction of the Church of England—my own Church?”

“My dear Lady Sylvia!” cried Mr. Bolitho, with a sort of paternal familiarity, “you must not put it in that way.”

But here Balfour interposed, for he perceived that she was becoming a trifle warm; and a young husband is anxious that his wife should acquit herself well before his friends.

“Look here, Sylvia,” he said, good-humouredly. “I suppose neither you nor I have any very keen personal interest in that question.

No doubt the Church of England will be dis-established in time, and before that time comes it will be well to prepare for the change, so that it may be effected with as little harm and as little harshness as possible. But the severance of the connection between Church and State has nothing to do with the destruction of the Church ; it is a political question ; and if Mrs. Chorley or anybody else is so constituted as to take a frantic interest in such a thing, why should any other person goad her by contradiction ? The opinions of Mrs. Chorley won't shift the axis of the earth."

" You mistake me altogether, Hugh," said Lady Sylvia. " I have not the slightest intention of entering into any discussion on any topic whatsoever with Mrs. Chorley."

Of course not. She already regarded Mrs. Chorley, and all her views and opinions, no matter what they were, with a sovereign contempt. For was it not this unholy alliance into which her husband seemed inclined to enter, that was the cause of his speaking in a slighting, indifferent manner about subjects

which ought to have been of supreme importance to him? And the cheerful and friendly face of Mr. Bolitho pleased her no longer.

"Are we going on to Mainz, then?" she asked of her husband.

"I think we might as well," said he. "There can be no harm in seeing this potentate, at all events. And we can go up the Moselle another time."

So he abandoned, at a moment's notice, that voyage up the beautiful river to which she had been looking forward for many a day, merely that he should go on to see whether he could bribe a solicitor into betraying a constituency. She knew that her noble husband could never have done this but under the malign influence of this godless old man, whose only notion of the British Constitution was that it offered him the means of earning a discreditable livelihood. And she, too, was to take her part in the conspiracy.

"You know, Lady Sylvia," said Mr. Bolitho, with a pleasant smile, "there is one thing will conciliate Mrs. Chorley more than your agree-

ing with her about politics ; and that is the fact that you are your father's daughter."

She did not quite understand at first. Then it dawned upon her that they hoped to bring Mrs. Chorley into a friendly mood by introducing that political termagant to the daughter of an earl. Lady Sylvia, who had retired into her guide-book, and would listen no more to their jargon of politics, resolved that that introduction would be of such a nature as Mrs. Chorley had never experienced before, in the whole course of her miserable, despicable and ignominious life.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CONSPIRATORS.

IT was late when they arrived at Mainz, and there was some little delay about getting supper ready, because, a quarter of an hour after it was ordered, they heard the squealing of a young cock outside, that being the animal destined for their repast. Moreover, when the fowl appeared, he turned out to be a tough little beast, only half cooked; so they sent him away, and had something else. For convenience' sake they supped in the great, gaunt, empty Speise-saal. It was about ten o'clock when they went up to the sitting-room on the first floor which they had reserved.

There was thus plenty of time for Lady Sylvia to have got over the first fierce feeling of wrath against Mr. and Mrs. Chorley, which

had been begotten by the cynicism of Mr. Bolitho and the indifference of her husband. Surely those large and tender blue-grey eyes—which her husband now thought had more than ever of the beautiful liquid lustre that had charmed him in the days of her sweet maidenhood—were never meant as the haunt of an incontrollable rage? And indeed when Mr. and Mrs. Chorley, who had been wandering about the town on foot, were brought up to the apartment at that late hour of the night by Mr. Bolitho, and introduced to Mr. and Lady Sylvia Balfour, there was nothing hideous or repellent about the political Gorgon, nothing calculated to awaken dismay or disgust. On the contrary, Mrs. Chorley, who was a tall, motherly-looking woman, with a fresh-coloured face, grey hair, thin and decided lips, and blue eyes that stared at one over her silver spectacles, was more than friendly with the young girl. She was almost obsequious. She was sure Lady Sylvia must be so tired; would not Lady Sylvia have a cup of tea now? she would be so pleased if she could do anything for Lady Sylvia. Lady

Sylvia sat proud and cold. She did not like to be fawned upon. She was listening, in indignant silence, for the first efforts of her husband and Mr. Bolitho to cajole this mercenary solicitor into betraying an English constituency.

One thing she might have been sure of—that her husband would not be guilty of any tricks of flattery or hypocrisy to gain his end. His faults lay all the other way—in a bluntness and directness that took too small account of the sensitiveness of other people. And on this evening he was in very good spirits, and at once attacked Mr. Eugenius Chorley with a sort of gay and friendly audacity. Now Mr. Chorley was a little, dapper, horsey-looking man, with shrewd, small eyes, a face wrinkled and red as a French rennet, accurately clipped whiskers, and a somewhat gorgeous necktie with a horse-shoe in emeralds in it. He was shrewd, quick, and clever; but he was also very respectable and formal; and he disliked and distrusted jokes. When Balfour gaily asked him what price Englebury put upon itself, he only stared.

"My friend Bolitho," continued Balfour, with a careless smile, "tells me you've got some land there, Mr. Chorley, of no particular use to you. If I were to buy that, and turn it into a public garden, wouldn't the inhabitants of Englebury be vastly grateful to me?"

Here Mr. Bolitho struck in, very red in the face.

"Of course you understand, Chorley, that it is mere nonsense—we were having a joke about it on the steamer. But really now, you know we may have a General Election in October and Mr. Balfour is naturally anxious to fix on some borough where he may have a reasonable chance, as Ballinascroon is sure to bid him good bye; and I have heard rumours that old Hardinge was likely to retire. You, as the most important man in the borough, would naturally have great influence in selecting a candidate."

It was a broad hint—a much franker exposition of the situation than Mr. Bolitho at all liked; but then the reckless audacity of this young man had compromised him.

"I see," said the small, pink-faced solicitor.

with his hands clasping his knee ; and then he added gravely—indeed, solemnly—“ You are doubtless aware, Mr. Balfour, that your expressed intention of giving the inhabitants a public garden would become a serious matter for you in the event of there being a petition ? ”

“ Oh,” said Balfour, with a laugh, “ I shan’t express any intention ! You would never think of repeating a private chat we had one evening by the Rhine. The people of Englebury would know nothing about it till long after the election —it would only be a reward for their virtuous conduct in returning so admirable a representative as myself.”

Mr. Chorley did not like this fashion of treating so serious a matter ; in the conduct of the public affairs of Englebury he was accustomed to much recondite diplomacy, caucus meetings, private influence, and a befitting gravity.

“ There is a number of our people,” said he cautiously, “ dissatisfied with Mr. ’Arnden.”

“ Parliament really wants some fresh blood

in it," urged Mr. Bolitho, who would have been glad to see a General Election every three months; for his Parliamentary agency was not at all confined to looking after the passage of private Bills.

"And his connection with Macleary has done him harm," Mr. Chorley again admitted.

"Oh, that fellow!" cried Balfour. "Well, I don't think a man is responsible for the sins of his brother-in-law; and old Harnden is an honest and straightforward old fellow. But Macleary! I know for a fact that he received £120 in hard cash for talking out a Bill on a Wednesday near the end of this very Session; let him charge me with libel, and I will prove it. Thank goodness, I am free in that respect. I am not hampered by having a blackguard for a brother-in-law——"

He stopped suddenly; and Lady Sylvia, looking up, was surprised by the expression of his face, in which a temporary embarrassment was blended with a certain angry frown. He hurried on to say something else; she sate and wondered. What could he mean by this allusion to a

brother-in-law? He had no brother-in-law at all. She was recalled from these bewildered guesses by the assiduous attentions of Mrs. Chorley, who was telling Lady Sylvia about all the beautiful places which she must visit, although Lady Sylvia treated these attentions with but scant courtesy, and seemed much more deeply interested in this electioneering plot.

For it was as a plot that she distinctly regarded this proposal; and she was certain that her husband would never have been drawn into it but for the evil influence of this worldling, this wily serpent, this jester. And what was this that they were saying now?—that Englebury had no politics at all; that it was all a matter of personal preference; that the dissenters in that remote and rustic Paradise had not even thought of raising the cry of disestablishment; and that Balfour, if he resolved to contest the seat, would have a fair chance of success. Balfour had grown a trifle more serious, and was making inquiries. It appeared that Mr. Chorley was not much moved by political

questions ; his wife was a dissenter, but he was not. Very probably Mr. Harnden would resign. And the only probable rival whom Balfour would in that case encounter was a certain Reginald Key, who was a native of the place, and had once represented a neighbouring borough.

“Confound that fellow,” said Mr. Bolitho ; “is he back in England again ? It does not matter which party is in power, they can’t get him killed. They’ve sent him, time after time, to places that invalid every Englishman in a couple of years ; and the worse the place is the better he thrives—comes back smiling, and threatens to get into Parliament again if they don’t give him a better appointment. What a nuisance he used to be in the House ! But certainly the feeblest thing I ever knew done by a Liberal Government was their sending him out to the Gold Coast—as if twenty Gold Coasts could kill that fellow ! Don’t you be afraid of him, Balfour. The Government will get him out of the way somehow. If they can’t kill him, they will at least pack him out

of England. So you think, Chorley, that our friend here has a chance?"

Mr. Chorley looked at his wife; so far the oracle had not spoken. She instantly answered that mute appeal.

"I should say a very good chance," she observed, with a friendly smile, "a very excellent chance, and I am perhaps in a better position to sound the opinions of our people than my husband is, for of course he has a great deal of business on his hands. No doubt, it would be a great advantage if you had a house in the neighbourhood. And I am sure Lady Sylvia would soon become very popular—if I may say so, I am sure she would become the popular candidate."

Surely all things were going well. Had this important ally been secured, and not a word said about disestablishment? It was Lady Sylvia who now spoke.

"I must beg you," said the girl, speaking in clear tones, with her face perhaps a trifle more proud and pale than usual, "I must beg you to leave me out of your scheme. I must say it

seems to me a singular one. You meet us, who are strangers to you, by accident in a foreign country ; and without consulting the gentleman who is at present your member, and without consulting any of the persons in the town, and without asking a word about my husband's opinions or qualifications, you practically invite him to represent the constituency in Parliament. All that happens in an hour. Well, it is very kind of you ; but it seems to me strange. Perhaps I ought not to ask why you should be so kind. There has been a talk about presenting a public green to the people ; but I cannot suppose you could be influenced by so paltry a bribe. In any case, you will be so good as to leave me, at least, out of the scheme ? ”

All this was said very quietly ; and it was with a sweet courtesy that she rose, and bowed to them, and left the room ; but when she had gone they looked as if a thunderbolt had fallen in the midst of them. Balfour broke this silence ; he was as surprised as the others, but he was far more deeply vexed.

“That shows the folly,” said he, with an angry look on his face, “of allowing women to mix themselves up in politics—I mean unmarried women—I mean young women, of no experience, who take everything *au grand sérieux*. I am sure, Mrs. Chorley, you will allow me to apologize for my wife’s conduct; she herself will be sorry enough, when she has time to reflect.”

“Pray don’t say another word, Mr. Balfour,” Mrs. Chorley replied; but all the bright friendliness had gone from her face, and she spoke coldly. “I have no doubt Lady Sylvia is a little tired by travelling—and impatient; and indeed my husband and myself ought not to have intruded ourselves upon her at so late an hour. I have no doubt it is eleven o’clock, Eugenius?”

Her husband rose; and they left together. Then Mr. Bolitho put his hands into his pocket, and stretched out his legs.

“The fat’s in the fire,” said he.

For a second Balfour felt inclined to pick a fierce quarrel with this man. Was it not he

who had led him into this predicament; and what did he care for all the constituencies, and solicitors, and agents that ever were seen as compared with this desperate business that had arisen between him and his young wife?

But he controlled himself. He would not even show that he was vexed.

"Women don't take a joke," said he, lightly. "Besides, she knows little about actual life. It is all theory with her; and she has high notions about what people should be and do. It was a mistake to let her know anything about election affairs."

"I thought she was deeply interested," said Mr. Bolitho. "However, I hope no harm is done. You will see old Chorley to-morrow before they leave—he is a decent sort of fellow—he won't bear a grudge. And from what he says, it appears clear to me that Harnden does really mean to resign; and Chorley could pull you through if he likes—his wife being favourable, that is. Only, no more at present about the buying of that land of his: I am afraid he felt that."

Bolitho then went; and Balfour was left alone. He began pacing up and down the room, biting the end of a cigar which he did not light. He could not understand the origin of this outburst. He had never suspected that placid, timid, sensitive girl of having such a temper. Where had she got the courage, too, that enabled her to speak with such clear decision? He began to wonder whether he had ever really discovered what the character of this girl was, during those quiet rambles in the bygone times.

He went into her room and found her seated in an easy-chair, reading by the light of a solitary candle. She put the book aside when he entered. He flattered himself that he could deal with this matter in a gentle and friendly fashion: he would not have a quarrel in their honeymoon.

“Sylvia,” said he, in a kindly way, “I think you have successfully put your foot in it this time.”

She did not answer.

“What made you insult those people so?”

"I hope I did not insult them," she said.

"Well," he said, with a laugh, "it was getting close to it. I must say, you might have shown a little more consideration to friends of mine——"

"I did not regard them as friends of yours; I should be sorry to do that."

"They were at all events human beings; they were not black-beetles. And if I think you might have considered my interest a little bit, and have remained silent, even if you had conjured up some imaginary cause of offence——"

"How could I remain silent?" she suddenly said with vehemence. "I was ashamed to see you in the society of such people; I was ashamed to see you listening to them; and I was determined that I, for one, would not be drawn into their unblushing conspiracy. Is it true, Hugh, that you mean to bribe that man? Does he really mean to accept that payment for betraying his trust?"

"My dear child," said he impatiently, "you don't understand such things. The world is

the world, and not the paradise of a school-girl's essay. I can assure you that if I were to buy that bit of land from Chorley—and so far it has only been spoken of as a joke—that would be a very innocent transaction as things go ; and there could be no bribing of the constituency, for they would not know of the public green till afterwards. Bribery ? There was more bribery in giving Mrs. Chorley the honour of making your acquaintance——”

“I know that,” said the girl with flushed cheeks. “I gathered that from the remarks of your friend, Mr. Bolitho. And I was resolved that I, at least, would keep out of any such scheme.”

“Your superior virtue,” said Balfour, in a matter-of-fact way, “has asserted itself most unmistakably. I shall not be surprised to find that you have killed off the best chance I could have had of getting into the next Parliament.”

“I should be sorry to see you get into any Parliament by such means,” she said ; for her whole soul was in revolt against this infamous proposal.

"Well, at all events," said he, "you must leave me to be the best judge of such matters, as far as my own conduct is concerned."

"Oh, I will not interfere," she said, with a business-like air, though her heart was throbbing cruelly. "On the contrary, if you wish to get back soon, in order to look after this borough, I will go whenever you please. There will be plenty for me to do at The Lilacs while you are in London."

"Do you mean," said he, regarding her with astonishment, "when we return to England—do you mean that you will go down to Surrey and that I should remain in Piccadilly?"

There was a voice crying in her heart, "*O my husband—my husband!*" but she would pay no heed to it. Her face had got pale again, and she spoke calmly.

"If that were convenient to you. I should not wish to be in the way if you were entertaining your friends—I mean the friends who might be of use to you at Englebury. I should be sorry to interfere in any way with

your chances of getting the seat, if you consider it right and honourable that you should try."

He paused for a moment, and then he said, sadly enough—"Very well."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HOME-COMING.

OF course they did not quarrel. We live in the nineteenth century. Tolerance of opinion exists in the domestic circle as well as elsewhere; and no reasonable man would like his wife to be that vague and colourless reproduction of her husband which Lady Sylvia, all unknown to Balfour, had striven to be. She ought to have her own convictions; she ought to know how to govern her own conduct; nay, more, he would allow her to do as she pleased. There was but one condition attached. "You shall have your own way in everything," said the man in the story to his wife; "but you can't expect to have my way too." Lady Sylvia was welcome to act as she pleased; but then he reserved the same liberty for himself.

This decision he came to without any bitterness of feeling. He was quite anxious to make all possible excuses for her. Doubtless she preferred Surrey to Piccadilly. It is true he had looked forward to her being a valuable helpmeet to him in his political life; but it was perhaps expecting too much of her that she should at once interest herself in the commonplace incidents of an election. He would be well content if this beautiful, tender-eyed creature, whose excessive sensitiveness of conscience was, after all, only the result of her ignorance of the world, were to wait for him in that sylvan retreat, ready to receive him and cheer him with the sweet solicitude of her loving ways. And in the mean time, he would try to make their companionship as pleasant as possible; he would try to make this journey one to be remembered with pride and gratitude. If there were one or two subjects which they avoided in conversation, what of that?

And as soon as Lady Sylvia heard that the Chorleys and Mr. Bolitho had left Mainz she became more tender and affectionate than ever towards her husband; and would do anything

to meet his wishes. Learning that certain of his political friends were at the moment at Luzern, she offered to go thither at once, so that he might have something to interest him apart from the monotony of a wedding-trip; and although, of course, he did not accept the offer, he recognized her intention and was grateful to her. Was it not enough occupation for him to watch the effect on this ingenuous mind of the new wonders that she saw—as they went on to Schaffhausen, and the Tyrol, and Verona, and Venice?

In their hotel at Venice, Balfour ran against a certain Captain Courtenay, with whom he had a slight acquaintance. They had a chat in the evening, in the smoking-room.

“Seen Major Blythe, lately?” said Balfour among other things.

“No,” answered the other somewhat coldly

“You don’t know, I suppose,” asked Balfour quite unconcernedly, “how that business at the C—— Club came off?”

The young man with the fair moustache eyed him narrowly. It is not a safe thing to tell

man evil things of his relatives, unless you know how they stand with regard to each other.

"Yes, I do know—eh—an unfortunate business—very. Fact is, Blythe wouldn't explain. I suppose there was some delay about the posting of that letter; and—and—I have no doubt that he would have paid the money next day if he had not been bullied about it. You see, a man does not like to be challenged in that way, supposing he has made a trifling mistake——"

"Yes," said Balfour, nodding his head in acquiescence, "but how was it settled?"

"Well," said the other, with some embarrassment, "the fact is—well, the committee—don't you know?—had to enforce the rules—and he wouldn't explain—and, in fact, he got a hint to resign——"

"Which he took, of course."

"I believe so."

Balfour said nothing further; but in his mind he coupled a remark or two with the name of Major the Honourable Stephen Blythe which

that gentleman would have been startled to hear.

Then he went upstairs to the sitting-room, and found Lady Sylvia at the open casement, looking out on the clear, blue-green lambent twilight.

“ Well, good wife,” said he, gaily, “ are you beginning to think of trudging home now? We ought to see a little of The Lilacs before all the leaves are gone. And there won’t be much to keep me in London now, I fancy ; they are getting more and more certain that the Government won’t bring on the dissolution before the new year.”

She rose, and put a hand on each of his shoulders, and looked up into his face with grateful and loving eyes.

“ That is so kind of you, Hugh. It will be so pleasant for us to get to know what home really is—after all these hotels ! And you will be in time for the pheasants ; I know several people will be so glad to have you.”

Of course the merest stranger would be delighted to have so distinguished a person as Mr.

Balfour come and shoot his pheasants for him ; failing that, would she not herself, like a loyal and dutiful wife, go to her few acquaintances down there and represent to them the great honour they might have of entertaining her husband ?

“ I see there is to be a demonstration on the part of the agricultural labourers,” said he, “ down in Somersetshire. I should like to see that—I should like to have a talk with some of their leaders. But I am afraid we could not get back in time.”

“ My darling,” she protested, seriously, “ I can start at five minutes’ notice. We can go to-night, if you wish ! ”

“ Oh no, it isn’t worth while,” said he, absently. And then he continued : “ I’m afraid your friends, the clergymen, are making a mistake as regards that question. I don’t know who these leaders are ; I should like to know more precisely their character and aims ; but it will do no good to call them agitators, and suggest that they should be ducked in horse-ponds——”

"It is infamous!" said Lady Sylvia. She knew nothing whatever about it. But she would have believed her husband if he had told her that St. Mark's was made of green cheese.

"I mean that it is unwise," said he without any enthusiasm. "Christ meant his Church to be the Church of the poor. The rich man has a bad time of it in the Gospels. And you may depend on it that if you produce among the poorer classes the feeling that the Church of England is on the side of the rich—is the natural ally of the squires, landlords, and other employers—you are driving them into the hands of the dissenters, and hastening on disestablishment."

"And serve them right, too," said she, boldly, "if they betray their trust. When the Church ceases to be of the nation, let it cease to be the National Church!"

This was a pretty speech. How many weeks before was it that Lady Sylvia was vowing to uphold her beloved Church against all comers, but more especially against a certain malignant iconoclast of the name of Mrs. Chorley? And

now she was not only ready to assume that one or two random and incautious speeches represented the opinion of the whole of the clergymen of England, but she was also ready to have the connection between Church and State severed in order to punish those recusants.

“I am not sure,” said Balfour, apparently taking no notice of this sudden recantation, “that something of that feeling has not been produced already. The working-man of the towns jeers at the parson. The agricultural labourer distrusts him; and will grow to hate him if he takes the landlord’s side in this matter. Now, why does not the Archbishop of Canterbury seize the occasion? Why does he not come forward and say: ‘Hold a bit, my friends. Your claims may be just; or they may be exorbitant: that is a matter for careful enquiry; and you must let your landlords be heard on the other side. But, whatever happens, don’t run away with the notion that the Church has no sympathy with you; that the Church is the ally of your landlord; that it is the interest of your parson to keep you poor, ill-fed, ill-lodged;

and ignorant. On the contrary, who knows so much about your circumstances? Who more fitting to become the mediator between you and your landlord? You may prefer to have leaders from your own ranks to fight your battles for you; but don't imagine that the parson looks on unconcerned, and above all don't expect to find him in league with your opponent.' Some mischief could be avoided that way, I think."

"Hugh," said she, with a sudden burst of enthusiasm, "I will go down to Somersetshire with you."

"And get up on a chair and address a crowd," said he, with a smile. "I don't think they would understand your speech, many of them."

"Well," said she, "perhaps I shall be better employed in making The Lilacs look very pretty for your return. And I shall have those slippers made up for you by that time. And, oh, Hugh—I wanted to ask you—don't you think we should have those cane rocking-chairs taken away from the smoking-room, now the colder evenings are coming in, and morocco easy-chairs put in their stead?"

"I am sure whatever you do will be right," said he.

"And papa will be back from Scotland then," said she. "And he writes me that my uncle and his family are going down for a few days; and it will be so pleasant to have a little party to meet us at the station——"

The expression of his face changed suddenly.

"Did you say your uncle?" said he, with a cold stare.

"Yes," said she, with innocent cheerfulness; "it will be quite pleasant to have some friends to welcome us, after our long stay among strangers. And I know papa will want us to go straight to the Hall, and dine there; and it will be so nice to see the dear old place—will it not?"

"No doubt," said he; and then he added, "Sylvia, if any invitation of that sort reaches you, you may accept for yourself, if you wish, but please leave me out of it."

She looked up, and perceived the singular alteration in his look; he had become cold, reserved, firm.

“ What do you mean, Hugh ? ” she cried.

“ Only this,” said he, speaking distinctly.

“ I prefer not to dine at Willowby Hall, if your uncle is there. I do not wish to meet him.”

“ Why ? ” she said in amazement.

“ I am not a talebearer,” he answered. “ It is enough for me that he is not the sort of person with whom I wish to sit down at table. More than that—but I am only expressing an opinion, mind ; I don’t wish to control your conduct—I think it might be better if you were to allow your acquaintance with your uncle’s family quietly to drop.”

“ Do you mean,” said she with the pale face becoming slightly flushed, “ that I am to resolve not to see those relatives of mine any more—without having a word of reason for it ? ”

“ I wished to spare you needless pain,” said he in quite a gentle way. “ If you want to know, I will tell you. To begin with, I don’t think your uncle’s dealings in regard to money matters are characterized by that precision—that—that scrupulous accuracy——”

“ I understand,” she said quickly, and the

colour in her face deepened. "But I did not expect you, of all men in the world, to reproach any one for his poverty. I did not expect that. My uncle is poor, I know——"

"Pardon me, Sylvia, I never made your uncle's lack of money a charge against him: I referred to a sort of carelessness—forgetfulness, let us say—as regards other people's money. However, let that pass. The next thing is more serious. As I understand, your uncle has been involved in some awkward business—arising from whist-playing—at the C—— Club; and I hear this evening that he has resigned in consequence."

"Who told you that?"

"Captain Courtenay."

"The gentleman who is staying in this hotel?"

"Yes."

"Have you anything else to say against my uncle?" she demanded.

"I think I have said enough; I would rather have said nothing at all."

"And you ask me," she said, with some in-

dignation in her voice, "to cut myself adrift from my relatives because you have listened to some story told by a stranger in a coffee-room. What do I know about Captain Courtenay ? How can he tell what explanation my uncle may have of his having resigned that club ? I must say, Hugh, your request is a most extraordinary one."

" Now, now, Sylvia," he said, good-naturedly, " you know I made no request ; I do not wish to interfere in the slightest way with your liberty of action. It is true that I don't think your uncle and his family are fit people for you to associate with ; but you must act as you think best. I, for one, don't choose to be thrown into their society."

Now Lady Sylvia had never had any great affection for her aunt, and she was not likely to hold her cousin Honoria in dear remembrance ; but after all her relatives were her relatives, and she became indignant that they should be spoken of in this way.

" Why did you make no objection before ? Why did you go and dine at their house ? "

He laughed.

"It suited my purpose to go," said he, "for I expected to spend a pleasant evening with you."

"You saw nothing wrong in my visiting them then."

"Then I had no right to offer you advice."

"And now that you have," said she with a proud and hurt manner, "what advice do I get? I am not to see my own relations. They are not proper persons. But I suppose the Chorleys are: is that the sort of society you wish me to cultivate? At all events," she added, bitterly, "my relatives happen to have an *h* or two in their possession."

"Sylvia," said he, going over and patting her on the shoulder, "you are offended—without cause. You can see as much of your uncle's family as you please. I had no idea you were so passionately attached to them."

That ended the affair for the moment; but during the next few days, as they travelled by easy stages homewards, an ominous silence prevailed as to their plans and movements subse-

quent to their reaching England. At Dover she found a telegram awaiting her at the hotel ; without a word she put it before her husband. It was from Lord Willowby, asking his daughter by what train she and her husband would arrive, so that the carriage might be waiting for them.

“ What shall I say ? ” she asked at length.

“ Well,” said he slowly, “ if you are anxious to see your relatives, and to spend some time with them, telegraph that you will be by the train that leaves Victoria at 5.15. I will take you down to The Lilacs ; but I must leave you there. It will suit me better to spend a few days in town at present.”

Her face grew very pale.

“ I don’t think,” she said, “ I need trouble you to go down with me. I can get to Victoria by myself. 5.15 I think you said ? ”

She rang for a blank telegraph-form.

“ What are you going to do ? ” said Balfour, struck by something peculiar in her manner.

“ I am going to telegraph to papa to meet me at the station, as I shall be alone.”

“ You will do nothing of the kind,” said he,



gently but firmly. "You may associate with what people you please—and welcome; only there must be no public scandal as regards the relations between you and me. Either you will go on with me to Piccadilly, and remain there; or I go down with you to The Lilacs, and leave you to go over to the Hall if you wish to do so."

She telegraphed to her father that they had postponed their return to The Lilacs, and would remain in town for the present. She bought a shilling novel at the station, and silently and assiduously cried behind it the greater part of the journey up to town. Arrived in London, the poor martyr suffered herself to be dragged away to that lonely house in Piccadilly. It was a sorrowful home-coming.

Then the cup of her sorrows was not yet full. With an inhuman cruelty her husband (having had his own ends served) sought to make light of the whole matter. All that evening he tried to tease her into a smile of reconciliation; but her wrongs lay too heavily upon her. He had even the brutality to ask her whether she could invite the Chorleys to dine with them on the

following Friday; and whether they had not better get a new dessert-service for the occasion. He did well, she thought, to mention the Chorleys. These were the people he considered it fit that she should meet: her own relatives he would debar.

END OF VOL. I.



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